Delia Pop-Flanja

CRISIS COMMUNICATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. CASE STUDIES ON FRANCE, THE UNITED KINGDOM AND ROMANIA

Presa Universitară Clujeană

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INTRODUCTION

> "It takes twenty years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently."
> *Warren Buffett*[1]

In crisis situations, the ability to communicate of individuals, companies or institutions is strongly challenged and the demands from this perspective are much higher than in regular circumstances. Even if a well elaborated crisis communication plan has been developed, the unknown and unpredictable factors that are usually connected to crises require complex response strategies.

The COVID-19 pandemic that we are facing nowadays is an example of a crisis situation that, because of its proportion, severity and length, has determined actors from both the private and the public sector to react in an unprecedented

[1] Warren Buffett apud Benjamin Snyder. "7 insights from legendary investor Warren Buffett." CNBC. 01.05.2017. https://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/01/7-insights-from-legendary-investor-warren-buffett.html (accessed 02.04.2021).

manner. The purpose of this book is to present some specificities and to assess the effectiveness of crisis communication of governments, heads of states and other officials during this pandemic.

The book is structured in four chapters. The first chapter consists in a brief literature review on several risk perception theories (of Mary Douglas, Aaron Wildavsky, Pauls Slovic and Frank Furedy), cultural dimensions theories (of Edward T. Hall and Geert Hofstede) and crisis communication theories (of William Benoit, Kim Witte and Timothy Coombs). The "rally round the flag effect" (concept introduced by John E. Mueller) and its applicability to the current crisis is also brought into discussion in the last section of this first chapter.

In the other chapters, we conducted three case studies on how the COVID-19 crisis was handled in France, the United Kingdom and Romania, in the interval March 2020 – March 2021. The reason behind choosing these three countries for our research is that we considered important to focus our analysis on countries where we could access the speeches and relevant information in the national language, without the risk of certain connotations being lost in translation; previous knowledge related to social-cultural aspects have also represented a criterion in selecting the countries.

The research conducted in the case studies is mainly descriptive, analytical and, on a smaller scale, comparative, depending on the specific situation of each country and on the aspects that we evaluated as being relevant in portraying the communication strategies. The focus is more on highlighting the positive and negative aspects of the crisis communication

in the three countries than on comparing them, since the socio-cultural, political, economic and medical contexts are different.

The findings of this book are based predominantly on a qualitative research methodology. In order to study governmental and other official websites, as well as statements or interviews of relevant actors involved in the crisis management, we used the methods of content analysis[2] and discourse analysis[3]. Acknowledging the political bias of certain news media, articles and other broadcasts were used mainly to gather information on the events, the general opinion of the public, official statements, studies or expert opinion. For legitimacy purposes, we verified the expertise and relevance of the journalists and authors for the domain of research pertaining to this study.

The quantitative analysis, conducted at a lower scale than the qualitative one, consists mostly in interpreting statistics and reposts from relevant sources, such as the Larics Center for Sociological Research, the ELABE/Berger-Levrault institute, the global communication company Edelman, the British Whitehall Monitor, the Romanian Association of International Medicine Manufacturers, or the market and consumer data platform Statista.

Our main research questions focus on whether the risk and crisis communication strategies discussed in the theoretical part of this book can be observed in the case of websites, other official platforms or statements of heads of

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[2] Klaus Krippendorff. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004.

[3] Paul Chilton. *Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 2004.

states and officials, what messages have been sent and how the citizens and the media have perceived the forementioned messages, what other persuasion techniques and rhetorical devices have been used, what pattens of crisis communication or positive and negative aspects of the communication strategies can be identified in each country and, consequently, what lessons can be learnt in order to better communicate in these severe crisis situations.

1. CRISIS COMMUNICATION – THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

In this first chapter, we will focus mainly on setting the theoretical background for the following chapters and on a short literature review related to the field of crisis communication. We will differentiate between the notions of danger, risk and crisis, and highlight the relevance of perception in risk and crisis communication.

Next, we will elaborate on two important theories in crisis communication, namely the *Image Restauration Theory* of William Benoit and the *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* of Timothy Coombs (with reference to the *Extended Parallel Process Model* developed by Kim Witte), theories that we will later use in the three case studies on the COVID-19 communication strategies in France, the United Kingdom and Romania.

The last section of this chapter is directed towards the "rally round the flag" effect, which consists in a short-term increase in popularity of political leaders in the context of a crisis, and to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic had this effect on the citizens.

1.1. DANGER, RISK AND CRISIS[4]

Risk is a term that is widely and frequently used, and, although it generally refers to the likelihood of a negative outcome, the perception regarding that outcome makes it also fairly subjective and polyvalent.

According to the cultural theory of risk, which was introduced by anthropologist Mary Douglas in the late ′60s and developed by Douglas together with Aaron Wildavsky in 1982, risk and danger are culturally driven ideas. According to this theory, there are cultural reasons that make people react in a certain way to a real and perceived danger and form judgments in this respect.

Bringing into discussion the notion of risk and how it evolved throughout the time, Douglas states that it became preferable to the notion of danger in political discourse as "plain danger does not have the aura of science or afford the pretension of a possible precise calculation" and "risk seems to look forward: it is used to assess the dangers ahead."[5]

Mary Douglas proposed a framework for cultural comparisons based on two dimensions: grid and group. The grid dimension describes how people take on different roles in a group, the amount of control and forms of stratification the

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[4] Section retrieved from Pop-Flanja, Delia. "Cross-Cultural Differences in Risk Perception and Risk Communication. A Case Study on the COVID-19 Outbreak." *Redefining Community in Intercultural Context RCIC'20 - European Cultural Community Vol. 9.* Braşov: Henri Coandă Air Force Academy Publishing House, 2020: 68-74.

[5] Mary Douglas. *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994: 25-26.

members accept. The group dimension refers to how strongly people are connected, how strong or weak the bonds between them are.[6]

On the group/grid scheme, four distinctive values or ways of life emerge: individualism, fatalism, hierarchy and egalitarianism, based on which social life and organizational behaviour are conducted, and, more generally, which represent the reasoning behind the formation of choices and preference.[7]

Another aspect that we are going to discuss in relation to risk perception is the lack of direct connection between the likelihood of a danger and the perceived severity of the danger. Logically speaking, the more probable a negative outcome is to occur and the more acute that negative outcome, the more people should perceive it as dangerous and fear it. However, the situation is much more complex. We will use the study of sociologist Frank Furedy, who asserts that "often people's perception of what constitutes danger has little to do with the real likelihood that they will suffer a misfortune from that source".[8] He explains that one of the reasons why officials and experts fail at properly communicating risk is that attitudes, which cannot be characterized as rational or

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[6] Mary Douglas. *Natural Symbols. Explorations in Cosmology. 3rd edition.* London and New York: Routledge, 2004: 57-71.

[7] Mary Douglas. *Cultural Bias.* London: Royal Anthropological Institute., 1978. and
Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky. *Risk and Culture: An essay on the selection of technical and environmental dangers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

[8] Frank Furedi. *Culture and Fear Revisited*. New York: Continuum, 2006: 23.

irrational, are shaped by a variety of influencers that are "part of the prevailing social and cultural climate".[9]

Furedy notices also some universal tendencies, such as the tendency to be more exposed by the media to the worst-case scenario and towards an exaggeration of the scale of the threat, as well as an increased fear of violent crimes, of side-effects, of environmental and health related dangers, such as epidemics and viruses. This "promotion of fear" is doubled by a decline of trust in humanity, which is not necessarily an increase of consciousness of risks, but more an increased suspicion of hidden interests behind a potential unrevealed risk and of powerlessness.[10]

After presenting an anthropological as well as a sociological standpoint on risk perception, we will focus next on a psychological perspective, namely the one of Paul Slovic. Slovic asserts that public attitudes, though less informed that those of experts, are of utmost importance as they mirror legitimate concerns and how much people are willing to accept, which, if not properly taken into account, lead to ineffective risk communication. One of the most important factors in laypeople's risk perceptions and attitudes, as opposed to those of experts, is considered to be the dread factor. The dread risk factor is defined by a "perceived lack of control, dread, catastrophic potential, fatal consequences and the inequitable distribution of risks and benefits".[11]

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[9] *Ibidem*: 25.

[10] *Ibidem*: 30-38.

[11] Paul Slovic. *The perception of risk. (Risk, society, and policy series).* London: Earthscan Publications, 2000: 220-231.

Slovic gives the example of laypeople's opposition to certain technologies, such as nuclear power, to illustrate the discrepancy between the scientific probability of death caused by an incident in this domain and the risk perception associated to it. The benefits of this technology are generally believed to be small and the risk of a potential catastrophic event to be extremely high, in spite of the lack of evidence in that direction, as risk is not quantified as number of fatalities.[12]

Since the case we are going to analyse falls under the category of public health emergencies, the position of the World Health Organization on risk communication cannot be disregarded. Gaya Gamhewage, a senior expert in the World Health Organization - Hazard Management Department, in a 2014 Introduction to Risk Communication, outlines three main tendencies that have influenced the field of risk communication in the 21st century, namely the less trust granted to experts and authorities, the shift to on-line sources and social networks as sources of health advice and the increase of citizenship journalism in the detriment of well-sourced new stories of the past.[13]

Making reference to Slovic's studies on the perception of risk, Gamhewage summarizes some of the main factors that increase public outrage in emergency situations. This level of outrage is believed to increase if a hazard is:

- "Unfamiliar and/or new (like a new disease, radiation, new drug)

[12] *Ibidem*: 229-231.

[13] Gaya Gamhewage. *An Introduction to Risk Communication*, available on the official website of World Health Organization, 2014: 1. https://www.who.int/risk-communication/introduction-to-risk-communication.pdf, (accessed on 15.03.2020).

- Involuntary (when risks are forced on the public such as in a compulsory immunization programme)
- Affects future generations (causing or being perceived as causing infertility)
- Cannot be seen or otherwise sensed (radiation, germs)
- Catastrophic in consequence (death, disability, major economic or environmental loss)
- Unfair in the distribution of harm and benefits (affects one group like children, or women)
- Potentially fatal (could lead to death)"[14]

Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic does seem to meet all the above-mentioned criteria and to determine a high level of public outrage.

Since crises are complex phenomena that take many forms, the term is not universally defined, but, for the purpose of this article, we will use the definition given by crisis communication expert Timothy Coombs, who delineates crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes".[15] This definition brings forward the perceptual nature of crises and validates the inclusion of socio-cultural factors in the analysis of communication strategies.

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[14] *Ibidem*: 3.

[15] W. Timothy Coombs. *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing and responding* (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007: 2-3.

1.2. THEORIES IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

In this section, we will examine two of the most important theories in the domain of crisis communication, the *Image Restoration Theory* of William Benoit and the *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* of Timothy Coombs, with reference to the *Extended Parallel Process Model* of Kim Witte. The reason for choosing to present these theories is that they are some of the most widely used theories when investigating crisis response strategies.

1.2.1. William Benoit and the Image Repair Theory

The *Image Repair Theory* (IRT), originally referred to as the theory of image restoration discourse, is a theory proposed by the political communication scholar William L. Benoit, in 1995, with the purpose of explaining threats to image and the corresponding responses or strategies that can be used to improve the image in situations of damaged reputation.[16]

The foundation of Image Repair Theory is based on two assumptions: first, that communication is a goal-oriented activity, although the goals of the communicators are multiple or sometimes unclear; second, that one of the central goals of communication is to maintain a positive reputation, as we are prone to receiving criticism or attacks from those whose needs and expectations are not satisfied by our actions[17].

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[16] William L. Benoit. *Accounts, excuses, apologies: A theory of image restoration discourse*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995a.

[17] William L. Benoit. *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies*, 2nd edition, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015: 14-19.

Based on the existing literature (e.g. Ware and Linkugel, Burke, Scott & Lyman, Ware & Linkugel, Rosenfield, Semin & Manstead, Schonbach, Goffman), Benoit proposes fourteen image repair strategies, grouped in five categories: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification.

The denial strategy consists in claiming lack of culpability and is divided in two sub-categories:

- Simple denial;
- Shifting blame, which can be more effective than simple denial, since the negative feelings of the audience are directed towards a different actor by redirecting accountability.

Evasion of responsibility consists in reducing the perception of the audience with regards to culpability, and is divided in four sub-categories:

- Provocation – the actor accused can claim that his/her action was in fact a reaction, a response to a different wrongdoing, caused by a different actor, hence that provoker should be held accountable;
- Defeasibility – the actor claims that he/she should not be held entirely accountable, as he/she did not have sufficient information or control over the situation;
- Accident – the actor offers information intended to explain the context of the wrongdoing, context that should reduce the degree or responsibility;
- Good intentions – the actor aims not to be held entirely accountable, by explaining that the

intention was good, and not meant to cause a wrongdoing.

The strategy of reducing offensiveness is dividend in six sub-categories:

- Bolstering – to reduce the negative effects of the wrongdoing, the accused reminds the audience of the good relations they had in the past;
- Minimization – the accused tries to persuade the audience that the wrongdoing is not as severe as it was perceived to be;
- Differentiation – the actor compares the wrongdoing to other, more severe, wrongdoings, in order to diminish its impact on the audience;
- Transcendence – the actor places the act in a different context, showing that the positive (or intended positive) impact of the wrongdoing should limit the blame;
- Attack accuser – the accuser tries to diminish the credibility of the one/ones making the accusations;
- Compensation – the accused tries to counter-balance the wrongdoing with other financial or non-financial benefits.

Another strategy highlighted by Benoit refers to taking corrective actions, with or without admitting guilt. This consists in reassuring the audience that the situation will be improved or restored to normal, by addressing the cause of the wrongdoing.

A fifth and final strategy brought out by Benoit is the mortification response, which consists in asking for forgiveness for the wrongdoing, with or without admitting

guilt. The actor can apologize for causing harm or just show sympathy for the harm caused by someone else. In some cases, Benoit states, ambiguity is used in the message, precisely for the actor not to be held directly accountable, especially from a legal point of view and to reduce reputation damage. [18]

1.2.2. Timothy Coombs - from the Situational Crisis Communication Theory to COVID-19 Crisis Communication

The *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT) was proposed by the communication scholar W. Timothy Coombs, in 2006. Coombs defines a crisis situation as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes"[19] By analysing the definition proposed by Coombs, we can observe the accent placed on how an event is perceived, more than the event *per se*. Moreover, he brings into discussion what is expected from the company or organization and how the image created represents a setting for the crisis situation. These two elements highlight the preventive aspects related to handling crisis situations, in spite of the crisis being defined as an unpredictable event. Even if the event has a high degree of unpredictability, it is not just the event that should be tackled when handling communication aspects related to crises, but the event in the entire context related to perceptions,

[18] *Ibidem*: 22-31.

[19] W. Timothy Coombs. *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing and responding* (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007: 2-3.

expectations, stakeholder involvement, specificity and manner of interpreting the situation.

Nevertheless, the responsibility is also perceived in relation with the severity of the crisis: “SCCT seeks to use research and theory to develop recommendations for the use of crisis response strategies. The crisis response strategies are matched to the nature of the crisis situation.” Severity of the damage is perceived as “the amount of financial, physical, environmental, or emotional harm a crisis can inflict.” The reputational threat is calculated based on four main elements, namely the type of the crisis, the severity of the crisis, the crisis history and the relationship history.[20]

Ten of the most common crisis response strategies identified by Coombs, based on the works of other crisis experts such as William Benoit, Allen and Caillouet, are divided by Coombs in four main clusters or postures:

- the Denial Posture,
- the Diminishment Posture,
- the Rebuilding posture and
- the Bolstering Posture.

In the Denial Posture, Coombs includes:

- “Attacking the Accuser – The crisis manager confronts the person or group that claims a crisis exists. The response may include a threat to use force against the accuser.
- Denial – The crisis manager states that no crisis exists. The response may include explaining why there is no crisis

[20] W. Timothy Coombs. "The Protective Powers of Crisis Response Strategies: Managing Reputational Assets during a Crisis." *Journal of Promotion Management* (The Haworth Press) Vol. 12(3/4) (2006): 241-260.

- Scapegoating – Some other person or group outside the organization is blamed for the crisis".

In the Diminishment Posture, he includes:

- "Excusing – The crisis manager tries to minimize the organization's responsibility for the crisis. The response can include denying any intention to do harm or claiming that the organization had no control of the events that led to the crisis.
- Justification - The crisis manager tries to minimize the perceived damage associated with the crisis. The response can include stating that there were no serious damages or injuries or claiming that the victims deserved what they received."

The Rebuilding Posture comprises two response strategies:

- "Compensation – The organization provides money or other gifts to the victims.
- Apology – The crisis manager publicly states that the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks forgiveness."

Finally, the Bolstering Posture comprises three strategies:

- "Reminding – The organization tells stakeholders about the past good works
- Ingratiation – The organization praises stakeholders.
- Victimage – The organization explains how it too is a victim of the crisis."

Crisis Response Strategies, by Posture (Coombs)[21]

Coombs also offers guidance on what are the most appropriate circumstances in which each response strategy should be used, as well as the liabilities of using them. The

[21] Retrieved from W. Timothy Coombs. *Ongoing Crisis Communication. Planning, Managing and Responding*, (4th edition), California: Sage, 2015: 174-175.

strategy of attacking the accuser is deemed appropriate mainly in rumour crises, but it can be offensive to victims or build sympathy for the attacker. Denial is also recommended in cases of rumours, but it can be offensive to the victims. It is also considered appropriate in *sector sprawl* crises, when the crisis is attributed to the entire industry, not just to one organization. Scapegoating, in spite of eliminating responsibility, should be avoided according to Coombs as it can create negative reputation and draw negative reactions both from the victims and non-victims. Excusing and justification should be used in crises with low levels of responsibility, but they can also anger victims and non-victims. Compensation is recommended in cases of crises with visible victims, but it is a financial burden for the organization. Apology, evaluated as the most complex response strategy, can be applied for any type of crises where the organization is primarily responsible. Coombs brings into discussion different facets of apology, such as full or partial apologies, as well as the *non-apology*, which does not consist in admitting guilt and taking responsibility for the crisis, but in showing regret for the situation and sympathy for the victims. Reminding is a useful strategy for organizations with a good prior reputation, but it can be perceived as an attempt to distract attention for the crisis. Ingratiation can be used in all circumstances when the organization received external support, but it can also be perceived as a distraction strategy. Lastly, victimage builds sympathy for the organization and is recommended in cases of product tampering, natural disasters, hacking, or workplace violence.[22]

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[22] *Ibidem*: 175-179.

Coombs focuses, in one of his most recent researches, on the analysis of COVID-19 crisis communication as well. In an article published in July 2020, for example, he reflects upon the unique communicative demands that the pandemic created for public sector crisis managers, such as anxiety, empathy, efficacy, fatigue, reach and threat.[23] Coombs mentions that, in spite of the uniqueness of the COVID-19 pandemic, public sector organizations are constantly preoccupied with the general threat of pandemics and public health crises, and even smaller-scale outbreaks would require similar crisis communication skills.[24]

He evaluates the *Extended Parallel Process Model* (EPPM), developed by Kim Witte[25], as an effective method for public health crisis communication. According to the EPPM, "health communication message is effective when people follow the preferred course of action in the message. In the EPPM, the preferred course of action is known as danger control", such as, in the case of COVID-19 pandemic, washing hands, social distancing and self-isolation. Similar to the SCCT, the EPPM concentrates on perceptions that determine and motivate people to take a certain action, that is to say "perceived susceptibility" and "perceived severity". Perceived susceptibility refers to the possibility to be affected by the crisis, whereas perceived severity refers to the acerbity of the threat. Another important aspect is the "plan efficacy". If the

[23] W. Timothy Coombs. "Public Sector Crises: Realizations from COVID-19 for Crisis Communication." *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 13(2) 2020 (2020). http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco/article/view/22498/18929 (accessed 04.10.2020)

[24] *Ibidem*: 991.

[25] Kate Witte; Gary Meyer, and Dennis Martell. *Effective health communication messages: A step-by-step guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001.

course of action proposed is seen as being effective in leading to the expected result and to be achievable, then people will get involved in taking and contributing to that particular action. Coombs considers that the "EPPM helps us to understand how a person moves from threat to taking action related to that threat or simply avoiding or ignoring the threat."[26]

Coombs also explains how message mapping can be used as a means of organizing risk messages in the case of the COVID-19 crisis. Message mapping can help address the appropriate key message based on the key audience and key concern. The key audience is represented by the entire constituency that public sector organizations represent, as everyone can contract the virus, and a concern can be to identify when someone is contagious. In this case, the key message can be that people can be contagious in spite of not having the typical symptoms. The message needs to be short, which can be a rather difficult task, as technical and detailed information might distract the public from the key message and contribute to their anxiety. The need for additional information can be addressed through interactive digital communication or phone numbers for non-digital users.

Part of the message must focus on measuring the efficiency of the response from the population, for example through "social media listening". If people do not understand how their response and actions contribute to solving the health crisis, how it will help them and the others, most probably they will not respond in the expected and requested manner. However, a type of message that proved to be

[26] W. Timothy Coombs. *op. cit.*, 2020: 992.

effective at one point during the crisis, especially if we deal with long crises, can become ineffective due to fatigue, so the "attention grabbing" aspect should not be disregarded. Another challenge for communicators is to make people aware of the dangers and threats of the virus, especially the categories less affected such as young people, without spreading panic, or, in Coombs's words, to "increase threat perceptions without increasing fear". Nevertheless, this requires constant evaluation from crisis communicators of how different categories of people assess the threat.[27]

As we can observe in the recommendations given by Timothy Coombs, a constant evaluation not only of the crisis situation but also of the way in which the messages sent by communicators are acknowledged, perceived and transformed into actions, should be made in these contexts. We can safely presume that, at national level, when the target audience is the entire population, such a constant evaluation can be an overambitious endeavour. However, as we will see in the case studies of this book, the emphasis on the effectiveness of the regulations imposed can be identified in many of the messages delivered by state officials.

Nevertheless, the reactions of citizens to international crisis situations are determined by multiple factors that go beyond the messages *per se* sent by officials, and, in the following section, we will focus on one of these factors, namely the "rally round the flag effect".

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[27] W. Timothy Coombs, *op. cit*, 2020: 994-998.

1.3. THE "RALLY ROUND THE FLAG" EFFECT

Tacking aspects related to United States Presidential popularity, which can be influenced by aspects such as the length in office, economic conditions or the presence of war, political scientist John E. Mueller brings into discussion the "rally round the flag" variable, which is widely associated to his name. This variable refers to the short-term increase in Presidential popularity during major international events that challenge the safety of the nation. The triggering event needs to be "specific, dramatic and sharply focused in order to assure public attention and interest".[28]

However, the effect is put under scrutiny as the increase in popularity is small, temporary and influenced by multiple factors, such as social, political and economic circumstances, that are difficult to be identified. Another aspect that should be regarded is the attitude of the opposition during such events, who can become less critical and more supportive towards the policies of the president, "for fear of looking foolish or unpatriotic", which also gives fewer sources of criticism and opposing interpretations for the media.[29] In a study conducted on how different groups of Americans are more or less likely to rally behind the president, Professor of global communications Matthew A. Baum concludes that people who are highly educated are less likely to rally, as they

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[28] John E. Mueller. "Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson." *American Political Science Review* (American Political Science Association) Vol. 64, no. No. 1 (1970): 18-34: 21.

[29] William D. Baker and John R. Oneal. "Patriotism or Opinion Leadership? The Nature and Origins of the 'Rally 'Round the Flag' Effect." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 45, no. 5 (2001): 661–687: 668.

are more politically aware and less likely to change their opinions due to external factors; also, interestingly, more popularity seems to be gained by the president in case of such major events if the economy is performing poorly; [30]

Even if, as exemplified above, studies focused mainly on the short-term increase in popularity in the context of international crises in the case of presidents, more particularly of US presidents, nowadays the "rally round the flag effect" is widely used to refer to the rallies behind the political leaders of a country or behind Governments. Steven Erlanger, chief diplomatic correspondent in Europe for The New York Times, explains that, in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, popular support increased for most heads of Government, regardless of how they handled the crisis, but that this effect is not expected to last. One of the examples that he gives is of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who also got infected with the virus, and of the British Government that is "the most popular in decades".[31] Since the existence of multiple factors has been brought into discussion in the paragraphs above, we can presume, although we cannot provide any evidence to support this belief, that the boost in popularity of the British Prime Minister has also been influenced by him becoming seriously ill, as a manifestation of sympathy.

Was the increase of trust in the Government only on the short-term? To answer this question, we will make use of the

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[30] Matthew A. Baum. "The Constituent Foundations of the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon." *International Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2002): 288-291.

[31] Steven Erlanger. "Popular support Lifts Leaders Everywhere. It May Not Last." *New York Times*, 02.10.2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/world/europe/coronavirus-presidents.html (accessed 12.03.2021).

2020 Edelman Trust Barometer, which measured the level of trust in NGOs, business, Government and media in the COVID-19 Pandemic context; the barometer shows that trust in Government has increased in 10 out of the 11 countries surveyed and reached its highest point in 20 years of study.

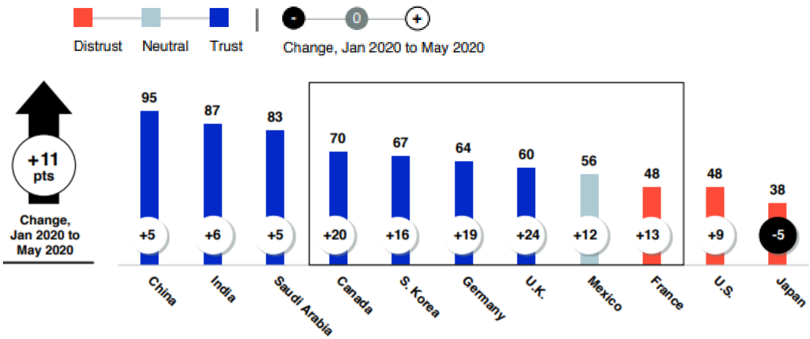


Figure 1.1. ***Rise in Government trust during the COVID-19 Pandemic***[32]

As we can observe, in the case of the UK there is a significant increase of 24 points and in the case of France, even if there is an overall distrust in the Government, the increase is of 13 points.

This increase might be attributed to the rally round the flag effect as well, as a similar study conducted by Edelman, for the interval May 2020-January 2021,[33] has shown a decrease in trust in Government by 15 points in the case of the UK, and a general decrease of 8 points for all 11 counties surveyed. However, as evidence on the importance of looking into the unique circumstances of each country and that each crisis

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[32] Retrieved from Edelman, *Edelman Trust Barometer 2020. Spring update: Trust and the Covid-19 Pandemic*, 2020: 15. https://www.edelman.com/research/trust-2020-spring-update (accessed 01.04.2021).

[33] Retrieved from Edelman. *Edelman Trust Barometer 2021*. 2021: 5. https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer (accessed 01.04.2021).

should be analysed individually, there is the case of France, the only country that has recorded an increased in trust in Government, by 2 points, for the same interval.

After this short introduction to some of the most prevalent theories in the field of risk and crisis communication, the next three chapters of this paper have the purpose of presenting three different manners of handing the COVID-19 crisis at national levels, in France, the United Kingdom and Romania.

2. COVID-19 COMMUNICATION - FRANCE

For the first case study, we have chosen to analyse crisis communication in France, during the COVID- 19 pandemic, in the interval March 2020 – March 2021. The reason for choosing France was is that we have analysed communication strategies in this country in other circumstances as well, such as terrorist attacks or migration, and we consider that our previous research will help us to better contextualize public health communication. As previously specified, linguistic and cultural aspects also represented a criterion for selecting this country.

Regarding the structure, the focus has been on analysing the information available on the webpages of the French Ministry of Health and of the Government, as well as statements of officials and civil servants such as the French President, the Prime-Minister, the Minister of Health and the Government spokespersons.

2.1. WEBPAGE OF THE FRENCH MINISTRY OF HEALTH

Next, we will look into the webpage of the French Ministry of Health [*Le Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé*][34], in order to see how the information was structured and how it addressed different categories of publics.

The "Current events" section dedicated to Coronavirus was divided in four sub-sections: a general section allocated to the state of affairs and current events, a section providing information on the virus, a section for health professionals and a last section for the social and medico-social sector. After vaccination became had available, information regarding this aspect occupied the first position on the website, with the motto of the vaccination campaign, "se vacciner, se protéger", highly visible.



Figure 2.1. ***Frontpage – official website of the French Ministry of Solidarity and Health***[35]

The official information page dedicated to the vaccination process focused on two main aspects:

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[34] French Ministry of Solidarity and Health. n.d. https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr (accessed 12.03.2021).

[35] *Ibidem*.

1. the vaccination strategy and the high-priority public;

2. the Vaccination Strategy Guidance Council and the list of rare pathologies justifying vaccination as a very high priority.

Next, the information was divided in a section allocated to the general public and another one to the health, health-social and social professionals. The section for the general public focused on answering the most common questions posed by the public, such as some key answers, the recommended conduct to be held, the vaccination strategy, the situation of people with disabilities, the available vaccines and the access to them, the medical monitoring of the vaccination and monitoring of side effects, the supply, storage and routing, the monitoring the deployment of vaccination, and some flyers on vaccination with accessible information and translations in 24 languages (among which English, Chinese, Arabic, but also Romani, Berber, Urdu or Wolof). The questions and answers section was written mostly in the 1st person singular, which made it more comprehensible and relatable to the general public (e.g. "Si je suis vacciné et en contact avec un malade de la COVID-19, dois-je prendre des précautions, comme le port du masque? / Dois-je venir avec des documents particuliers? / Suis-je obligé de me faire vacciner?").

This linguistically adapted approach is visible on the general website of the Government as well. To illustrate this approach, the section "Official information/Les informations officielles" contains information and guidance from the French Government regarding the current outbreak of Coronavirus disease COVID-19 in France, available in French in English but

also in Simplified French/français simplifié. Hence, the Government makes the information available for a wide range of publics. Similarly, in March, in order to address the needs of people having difficulties in reading and comprehension, the Government published a simplified version of the Certificate of Derogatory Movement (also available in English) in FALC (français facile à lire et à comprendre)[36]. The content was similar to the one on the regular Certificate of Derogatory Movement, but the phrases were easier to be understood and were accompanied by pictograms.

Returning to the website of the Ministry of Health, it also offered constantly updated and complex dashboards, with information related to the vaccinations throughout the county, where we could find visual representations of the number of people receiving one or two doses of the vaccine, the number of vaccinated people by age groups, gender, department etc. Moreover, certain sections, such as the one below, also provided information on what the objectives of the Government in that respect were.

[36] Government of France. *Attestation de déplacement*. n.d. https://handicap.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/attestation-deplacement-falc.pdf (accessed 01.10.2020).

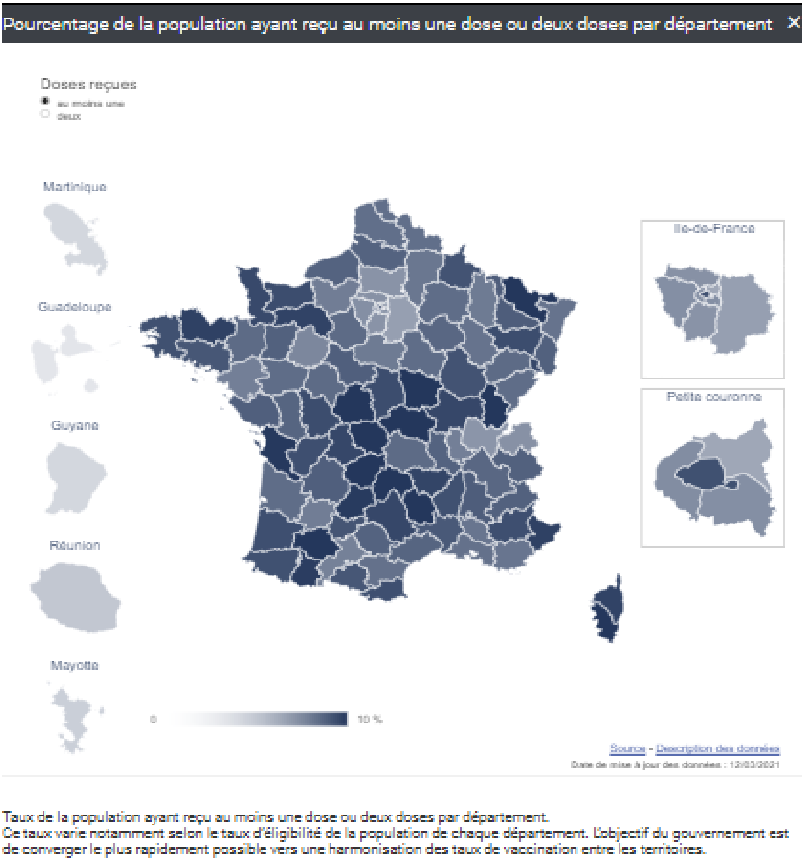


Figure 2.2. ***Rate of the population that received at least one or two doses per department.***[37]

The caption below the map informed that the rate illustrated varies according to the eligibility rate of the population of each department and that the Government's objective was to converge as quickly as possible towards harmonizing vaccination rates between the territories.

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[37] French Ministry of Solidarity and Health. *Le tableau de bord de la vaccination.* n.d. https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/grands-dossiers/vaccin-covid-19/article/le-tableau-de-bord-de-la-vaccination (accessed 12.03.2021).

We consider the website of the French Ministry of Solidarity and Health to be user-friendly and the information provided to be rich and easy to be accessed by different categories of publics. The correlations between the statistics and the objectives of the Government show transparency and good coordination between the institutions.

2.2. FRENCH MINISTER OF HEALTH

Next, the communication of the French Minister of Health, Olivier Véran, shall be analysed. In the analysed interval (March 2020-March 2021) Véran delivered ministerial video statements on a weekly basis, similar in structure and time allocated (approximately 40 minutes each).

In the first section on the state of affairs and current events available of the website of the Ministry of Health, we can find a lengthy 48 minutes and 30 seconds video statement from Véran, from September 2020, namely "Le point de situation hebdomadaire d'Olivier Véran, ministre des Solidarités et de la Santé, sur l'épidémie de COVID-19"[38], with sign language interpreting. Even if he did not have a poor reputation, we can still observe some image restoration strategies, as the crisis situation was constantly putting

[38] Olivier Véran. "Point de situation hebdomadaire COVID-19 - 17 Septembre 2020." *Government of France Facebook page.* 17.09.2020. https://www.facebook.com/Sante.Gouv/videos/2746021059054458 (accessed 11.11.2020).
and
French Ministry of Solidarity and Health."solidarites-sante.gouv.fr." *Points de situation COVID-19.* n.d. https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/soins-et-maladies/maladies/maladies-infectieuses/coronavirus/etat-des-lieux-et-actualites/article/points-de-situation-covid-19 (accessed 10.10. 2020).

authorities under a reputational threat. Hence, we can observe the strategy of putting the crisis in a wider, international context ("l'épidémie est à nouveau très active dans notre pays, comme d'ailleurs dans d'autres pays voisins"), to show that the severity of the situation is not caused by poor crisis management at the national level. Véran emphasized on the idea of transparency and correlation between state institutions and officials:

> "conformément à la demande du président de la République et du Premier Ministre" [...] "vous apporter toutes les informations en transparence" / "J'ai la confiance du président de la République. Nous sommes parfaitement en ligne. Nous formons un pack avec le gouvernement, avec le Premier Ministre Jean Castex. Rassurez-vous, on travaille".[39]

After showing appreciation and thanking the French citizens for their daily efforts, the minister brought forward the context that had led to the increase in the number of cases. He did not cast blame on the citizens, but placed the cause on the fact that preventive gestures could be counter-intuitive and that the period since these measures had been put into practice was very long. The general message of Véran was that state officials were better prepared than they had been for the 1st wave, preventive measures and tools for monitoring the situation in real time did exist, French citizens knew them, the officials acknowledged and appreciated the efforts of the medial staff and of the citizens of putting the measures into practice; however, a reminder on the necessary preventive measures were deemed necessary.

[39] Olivier Véran. "Point de situation hebdomadaire COVID-19 - 17 Septembre 2020." *Government of France Facebook page.* 17.09.2020. https://www.facebook.com/Sante.Gouv/videos/2746021059054458 (accessed 11.11.2020).

We can also observe that the strategy of fighting against the pandemic has a national approach, with local adaptations ("anticiper et intervenir d'une manière ciblée"), as strategies vary depending on the situation in each region, but also with adaptations for the vulnerable groups and the elderly.

Visual representations of the constant increase in the number of cases (83,84/100000 inhabitants) have also been displayed, together with technical details and expert opinions:

> "Sachez que nous avons déterminé avec les scientifiques des niveaux de seuil qui quand ils sont franchis doivent nous alerter. Le seuil d'alerte, nous l'avions établi à 50 cas pour 100 000 habitants. Aujourd'hui, 53 départements ont dépassé ce seuil et sont donc classés dans cette fameuse zone de circulation active du virus."[40]

Differentiation was also used, to show that, in spite of the fact that the problem was global, the response in France was better from certain perspectives, such as the COVID-19 testing of the citizens ("La France est le pays où le plus de tests sont réalisés").

Olivier Véran's statement was followed by a questions and answers session, the questions having been addressed on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. We consider relevant that a person was reading and giving voice to the questions addressed online, as it made the interaction between the minister and the public more vivid. Next, Véran also answered the questions addressed by the press representatives present at the conference. He demonstrated good communication and argumentative skills during these interactions as well, as he gave feedback on the questions

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[40] *Ibidem.*

("Vous posez une question fondamentale ") and reinforced his affirmations with scientific and medical arguments.

One of the journalists brought forward a discord between the opinions of the minister, who allegedly had demanded even more drastic measures, and those of the president, who disagreed with those measures. The minister was equivocal and refrained from giving an answer to this question, stating that these issues had been discussed during a defence council and that he cannot reveal information on the discussions taking place in this contact. He reinforced the idea of a good collaboration and correlation between the Government and the Ministry of Health ("Nous sommes parfaitement en ligne sur la stratégie. […] Rassurez-vous, tout va bien, et on travaille. C'est ça l'essentiel"). Other equivocation techniques[41] used by Véran were to acknowledge the question without answering it or to claim having already answered the question on this subject before. This is not the only occasion when equivocation was used in order to avoid answering the questions addressed by the journalists as, in a statement delivered on 23 September 2020[42], for example, the minister also claimed not knowing the answer, or that the information requested was confidential ("Attendons les résultats de la constatation"/ "Nous n'avons pas présenté en Conseil des Ministres le projet de loi de financement".)

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[41] For more information on equivocation techniques, see Peter Bull. *The Microanalysis of Political Communication: Claptrap and Ambiguity*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

[42] Olivier Véran. "Point hebdomadaire du ministre des solidarités et de la santé Olivier Véran sur la stratégie de lutte contre la COVID19 - 23 Septembre 2020." *Government of France Facebook page*. 23.09.2020. https://www.facebook.com/gouvernement.fr/videos/782727039153527 (accessed 11.11.2020).

In a press conference held on 1 October[43], the minister stated that scientists were working to find a cure for the virus precisely in the offices above the place where the press conference was being held. He repeated the four pillars of the anti-COVID strategy that had been mentioned in the previous conferences, visual aids were displayed again and he reiterated the idea of total transparency; however, he pointed out the fact that, as a result of all the measures that had been taken, the contagiousness of the virus had decreased. This affirmation can serve in giving more legitimacy to the preventive restrictions.

Véran generally avoided using words with a strong negative emotional impact, such as "deaths" or "fatalities", This was one of the few press conferences, in the analysed interval, when the minister mentioned the word "deceased", not only "hospitalized people" or "patients in intensive care units".

In the previous conferences, he made reference to the opinions of specialists and scientists for legitimacy purposes and to give credibility to the information that he was conveying; moreover, in this press conference, an epidemiologist who was also a member of the scientific council was present alongside Véran, namely Professor Arnaud Fontanet, to validate his affirmations. This can be evaluated as a good communication strategy, to show that the scientists involved in the crisis committee are not just abstract entities that citizens cannot relate to. Having a representative

[43] Olivier Véran, Véran, Olivier. "Point hebdomadaire d'Olivier Véran sur la stratégie de lutte contre la COVID19 - 1 Octobre 2020." *Government of France Facebook page.* 01.10.2020. https://www.facebook.com/gouvernement.fr/videos/698765090997004 (accessed 11.11.2020).

present and the fact that the minister mentioned the proximity of the offices where they were working on finding a cure can lead to an increase in how genuine the information that he conveyed was being perceived by the public.

Florian Silnicki, expert in crisis communication and founder of the crisis communication and management agency *LaFrenchCom*[44], analysed in an article for *Le Télégramme*[45], in March 2020, the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies of French President Emmanuel Macron, former Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, Government spokesperson Sibeth Ndiaye and Minister of Health Olivier Véran. Véran was considered to be the minister with the most coherent and effective communication strategies, as he was reassuring in his interventions, he displayed empathy and transparency. In contrast, Macron was considered to have displayed a “warrior rhetoric” and a “Père de la Nation” figure, using a “moralizing” tone. The last intervention of Prime Minister Philippe in that position was also criticized by Silnicki; the former Prime Minister was believed to have had a pedagogical speech, but the confinement measures were not clearly presented and he did not manage well the interventions of his ministers. Ndiaye’s communication was also criticized by Silnicki who evaluated that she was doing precisely what should not be done in crisis communication, namely leaving the impression that she was dishonest and even “blind”. Silnicki believed that she was taking the role of defending the

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[44] Florian Silnicki. *Florian Silnicki webpage.* https://floriansilnicki.fr/parcours-de-florian-silnicki (accessed 01.10.2020).

[45] Martin Vaugoude. "Coronavirus: qui a la communication de crise la plus efficace?" *Le Télégramme*, 24.03.2020. https://www.letelegramme.fr/france/coronavirus-qui-a-la-communication-de-crise-la-plus-efficace-24-03-2020-12531442.php (accessed 01.10.2020).

president instead of simply presenting the decisions taken by the Government.

In an article for the magazine *Le Point Politique*, Silnicki compared the communication style of Olivier Véran with the one of the former Minister of Health, Agnès Buzyn. Whereas Buzyn was using more of a "me" centred speech and was bringing forward his legitimacy as a doctor to convey the message that the situation was under control, Véran had a more objective approach in presenting the facts and bringing forward the expertise of medical and epidemiological specialists. He was considered by Silnicki to have found a good balance between two important factors of crisis communication, informing and taking action.[46]

2.3. FRENCH GOVERNMENT SPOKESPERSONS

The communication style of former Government spokeswoman Sibeth Ndiaye (1 April 2019 – 6 July 2020) was subject to numerous controversies. According to Christian Delporte, Professor in Communication at Université de Versailles, "elle n'est pas très bonne élève pour la langue de bois, elle est un peu caricaturale. Et il y a un peu de légèreté dans sa façon de traiter les choses"[47]

[46] Géraldine Woessner. "Coronavirus: la com sans faute d'Olivier Véran", *Le Point. Politique*, 10.03.2020. https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/coronavirus-la-com-sans-faute-d-olivier-veran-10-03-2020-2366507_20.php (accessed 01.10.2020).

[47] Christian Delporte apud Lucile Descamps. "Couacs et contradictions: Sibeth Ndiaye est-elle la porte-parole idéale pendant cette crise?" *Yahoo Actualités*, 27.03.2020. https://fr.news.yahoo.com/coronavirus-sibeth-ndiaye-porte-parole-ideale-pendant-crise-170023308.html (accessed 07.02.2021).

In an article for *Le Figaro,* journalist Charles Jaigu called her "la gaffeuse du président".[48] In a press conference on 11 March, she classified some measures taken by Italy as ineffective, as the control of the temperatures of travellers to Italy upon arrival from high-risk zones and the closing of borders for flights coming from China had not stopped the propagation of the pandemic; her remarks were judged by journalist Laure Equy as lacking diplomacy.[49]

Nevertheless, in the same conference of 11 March, we can also observe some strategies similar to the ones used by Véran, such as justifying the measures by scientific evidence ("Ce n'est pas une décision politique, ce n'est pas une décision prise sur un coin de table, par telle ou telle autorité politique […] c'est étayée scientifiquement"), or emphasizing the fact that the decisions were transparent ("dans la transparence vis-à-vis des Français").

In September 2020, during a round table on crisis communication in the Senate[50], in the context in which the authorities had been accused of disseminating contradictory and unclear instructions on issues such as wearing a mask, Ndiaye recognized that several communication mistakes had been made, such as using tactless phrases ("des phrases

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48 Charles Jaigu. "Sibeth Ndiaye, la gaffeuse du president" *Le Figaro*, 29.05.2020. https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/sibeth-ndiaye-la-gaffeuse-du-president-20200529 (accessed 01.10.2020).

49 Laure Equy. "Enseignants, masques, Italie... les faux pas à répétition de Sibeth Ndiaye." *Libération*, 26.03.2020. https://www.liberation.fr/france/2020/03/26/enseignants-masques-italie-les-faux-pas-a-repetition-de-sibeth-ndiaye_1783112 (accessed 07.10.2020).

50 Sibeth Ndiaye. "Comptes rendus de la ce évaluation des politiques publiques face aux pandemies." The Senate of France. 23.09.2020. http://www.senat.fr/compte-rendu-commissions/20200921/covid.html#toc7 (accessed 05.10.2020).

maladroites, alambiquées, avec des exemples mal choisis”). She stated that her communication was not authoritative, that the situation was severe and uncertain at the beginning of the crisis, that she had more than ninety media appearances in six months and that the citizens might have not properly understood the messages she was sending.

> “Force est de constater que nos concitoyens n'ont pas entendu. […] La difficulté est presque cognitive. Quand tout le monde a peur, chacun a besoin d'assurance, s'accrochant au moindre bout de phrase en ce sens. Et si cette phrase est relayée sur Twitter, la complexité du contexte où elle s'inscrit est complètement gommée.”[51]

We consider these disclaimers, in spite of the fact that she acknowledged that the context might have led to confusions, as a form of excusing herself by claiming the good intentions behind her actions, but also as a form of casting the blame on the citizens for their lack of understanding. Taking into account her position of spokesperson, these communication mistakes can be translated as poor knowledge of the public.

In the same context, the former spokeswoman highlighted what were the three main phases of the COVID19 crisis communication governmental strategies. In the first phase, the institutional communication had as main focus to explain what Coronavirus was and to make French citizens adapt their behaviour accordingly, namely social distancing and washing their hands. In order to determine people to change their behaviour, the communication also consisted in “dramatizing” the issues. The second phase was directed towards determining people to physically interact as little as

[51] *Ibidem.*

possible, whilst maintaining a good continuation of economic activities. The third phase began when the first confinement period was over, and the message conveyed by the Government was for people to be cautious, for fear that the virus might spread more actively. Ndiaye stated that the citizens had been explained what the reasons behind those measures were and that, inevitably, contradictions such as in the messages "Restez chez vous" and "Allez travailler" did occur throughout this process.

Moreover, Ndiaye brought forward other measures taken in order to keep the population well informed, such as the WhatsApp Chatbot, where people could receive automatic answers to their questions, and the collaboration with social networks to post public health messages on Coronavirus. She admitted also to a weak point of the Government's website. Since the section dedicated to the virus represented a major source of information, receiving 750 000 visitors per day, debunking proved to be necessary. Hence, the Government Information Service, through the "Désinfox Coronavirus" service, which listed "fact-checking" articles on COVID-19 but ended up being denounced by many journalists that perceived it as a form of censorship affecting press freedom, differentiated between good and bad articles. As a result, the service was withdrawn a few days later.[52]

In July 2020, Sibeth Ndiaye was replaced in her position of spokesperson by Gabriel Attal, who was portrayed as being the opposite of Ndiaye in his communication style as he was

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[52] *Ibidem.*

more a mediator than a warrior.[53] His approach was to focus more on young people through influencers, Instagram or Twitch. In October 2020, for example, Gabriel Attal launched its Twitch channel, a video platform mainly used for live video game streaming.

The idea of talking to young people and relying on influencers to get the messages across, using less traditional media, was brought about by Gabriel Attal on 1 October 2020 in the show *Balance ton post*, when he declared that "On a besoin que des jeunes qui parlent à d'autres jeunes passent ces messages, fassent les relais"; he also put forward the idea of a weekly post-Council of Ministers conference with influencers, which was eventually replaced by Sunday appointments on Instagram. For example, his discussion on 1 November 2020 with the 23-year-old Youtuber and influencer Marie Lopez, known under the pseudonym EnjoyPhoenix, whose Instagram page has more than 5 million followers, had over 380000 views by February 2021. On his personal Instagram account, the spokesperson regularly organized question-and-answer sessions with his 40000 subscribers, and he answered not only formal, classical questions, but also less formal ones, such as whether using Tinder accounts was allowed during lockdown.[54] This approach, and even being on a first-name basis with the young people at times, brought more

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[53] Esther Attias. "Porte-paroles: Gabriel Attal ou l'anti Sibeth Ndiaye", *Challenges*, 25.09.2020 https://www.challenges.fr/politique/porte-paroles-du-gouvernement-sibeth-ndiaye-contre-gabriel-attal_728800 (accessed 10.01.2021).

[54] Justine Faure. "Instagram, Twitch et radio libre: Gabriel Attal, SAV du gouvernement auprès des jeunes." *LCI*, 05.11.2020. https://www.lci.fr/politique/instagram-twitch-et-radio-libre-gabriel-attal-sav-du-gouvernement-aupres-des-jeunes-2169098.html (accessed 10.01.2021).

authenticity to governmental communication and made the communication more accessible. In spite of the criticism that was also brought against this approach because the interactions were rather consensual and lacked journalistic scrutiny, or that the influencers had been financially compensated for bringing forward a positive image of the Government,[55] this approach can be effective in addressing a public that has been rather disregarded and whose long-term influence is underestimated.

2.4. PRIME MINISTERIAL COMMUNICATION

Appointed Prime Minister in July 2020, after the resignation of Édouard Philippe, Jean Castex did not have an easy task in terms of communication, as he was less known to the public and the former Prime Minister had enjoyed a substantial popularity. Opposing Philippe's "certain distance and sobriety in speaking", Castex "display[ed] a character perceived as accessible and comprehensible by the large public". An important facet of his communication style was considered to be his concern for the everyday, common activities of the citizens, travelling across the country and being present among them rather often. His confidence rate reached, according to Harris Interactive, 56% in August, being at that time 6% higher than Macron's. However, his popularity can also be a result precisely of the fact that he was less known to the public, and, once the element of novelty faded away, the

[55] Oliver Adey. "The government ad: the unfortunate slip of the influencer EmmaCakeCup on her live with Gabriel Attal: Femme Actuelle Le MAG" *Get to Text*, 15.01.2021. https://gettotext.com/the-government-ad-the-unfortunate-slip-of-the-influencer-emmacakecup-on-her-live-with-gabriel-attal-femme-actuelle-le-mag/ (accessed 10.01.2021).

focus was directed more on the actions taken by the Prime Minister. This strategy of trying to satisfy everyone can end in satisfying no one.[56]

This anticipated lack of efficiency of Castex's communication strategy on the long term was confirmed by *Politico* journalist Elisa Braun. In an article published in October 2020, Braun stated that, in spite of making a name for himself as *Monsieur Déconfinement* (Mister Lockdown Exit), his crisis management skills were no longer seen as effective by the public and his popularity decreased rapidly as the second Coronavirus wave hit the country. Among the communication mistakes made by Castex, Braun mentioned blaming the citizens for being careless and asking them to regain their self-control. Another communication mistake was to mispronounce the name of the national tracing app StopCovid, and to admit, in spite of encouraging the population to download the app, that he himself had not done that.[57]

Therefore, in the next section, we propose an analysis of one of Castex's speeches, namely the one delivered on the 14 of January, 2021[58], based on the crisis communication theories

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[56] Olivier Cimelière. "Communication politique: La méthode Jean Castex va-t-elle faire long feu?" *Le Blog du Communicant*, 30.08.2020. https://www.leblogducommunicant2-0.com/2020/08/30/communication-politique-la-methode-jean-castex-va-t-elle-faire-long-feu/(accessed 07.02.2021).

[57] Elisa Braun. "French PM struggles to make his mark as second wave hits." *Politico*, 18.10.2020. https://www.politico.eu/article/jean-castex-france-struggles-coronavirus/(accessed 01.04.2021).

[58] Retrieved form Jean Castex. "Discours du Premier ministre - Mesures contre la COVID-19 - 14.01.2021." *Government of France.* 14.01.2021. https://www.gouvernement.fr/partage/12021-discours-du-premier-ministre-mesures-contre-la-covid-19-14012021 (accessed 10.02.2021).

presented in the first chapter. The Prime Minister's speeches have been delivered on a weekly basis, in line with those of the Minster of Health; we consider this strategy of keeping citizens informed at regular intervals useful, as they know when to expect statements from authorized sources and can make them less susceptible to trying to obtain information from sources that might be misleading. Even from the beginning of the speech, the Prime Minster specified that the virus continued to circulate actively throughout Europe, hence, the problem was not limited to the level of France. This can be interpreted as a transcendence restoration strategy, in accordance with the *Image Repair Theory* proposed by William Benoit, as the crisis is placed in a broader context:

> "Depuis cet automne, en réalité, tous les pays européens font face à des vagues épidémiques qui se succèdent et varient en intensité au fil des mois selon les conditions climatiques, le respect des mesures barrières et les mesures de freinage qui sont mises en place."[59]

We can observe another strategy illustrated in the *Image Repair Theory*, the differentiation, as Castex highlighted that the measures taken in France, such as the rapidly adapted confinement and keeping numerous public institutions closed, made it stand out from the neighbouring countries, the comparison putting it in a more favourable position:

> "D'autres pays ont davantage tardé à agir ou ont rouvert prématurément leurs bars ou leurs restaurants, et dû se résoudre à des mesures de confinement beaucoup plus strictes, allant même jusqu'à la fermeture de leurs écoles comme c'est le cas aujourd'hui du Royaume-Uni, de l'Irlande, de l'Allemagne, de l'Italie ou du Danemark. […] Les résultats de notre stratégie

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[59] *Ibidem.*

nous placent aujourd'hui dans une situation comparative plus qu'honorable en Europe, tant au niveau des taux d'incidence que des taux de positivité des tests."[60]

Another crisis communication response strategy that we can identify, even if it is small-scaled and not so strikingly used, is the ingratiation, illustrated in the *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* of Timothy Coombs, as Castex complimented and showed appreciation for the efforts of the citizens in fighting against the pandemic:

"[…] grâce au comportement responsable qui a été le vôtre nous rappelant combien la lutte contre cette épidémie est l'affaire de tous et de chacun. / Cette reprise très progressive, attendue par les étudiants, l'est aussi par leurs professeurs, dont je veux saluer ce soir l'engagement, comme je salue celui de l'ensemble des personnels de l'éducation."[61]

The Prime Minister gave very detailed information on the state of affairs of the pandemic throughout the country and on the measures that were to be taken, with a focus on justification and on the collaboration with the private sector, as well as with other institutions and state officials, such as the Minister of Health and the President.

Evaluating the speech from the perspective of the *Extended Parallel Process Model* of Kim Witte, we can identify a focus placed on the severity of the crisis as well as on the susceptibility of people being affected by it. Moreover, self-efficacy was addressed, as Castex mentioned repeatedly that the measures taken had proven to be effective and continuing to follow the recommendations of the authorities was

[60] *Ibidem.*
[61] *Ibidem.*

considered to contribute to an improvement in the current situation and a reduction in the future negative effects of the pandemic.

Regarding the rhetorical figures used by Castex in his speech, although not abundant, we can identify several aspects such as the hypophora: "[…] quelle est la situation aujourd'hui et comment a-t-elle évolué depuis une semaine? / Pourquoi ce choix ?", the repeated antithesis France vs. other European countries, or the anaphora and the tricolon : "tous les pays ont pris des mesures de restriction pour freiner l'épidémie. Tous ne l'ont pas fait au même moment. Tous ne l'ont pas fait avec la même intensité […] / Nous devons entendre le besoin de sécurité et de stabilité [..] Nous ne devons pas ajouter de l'incertitude économique à l'incertitude sanitaire. Nous devons rester à leur écoute et savoir ajuster encore… ".

To sum up, apart from being largely informative, the speech of Prime Minister Jean Castex contained multiple elements of the crisis response strategies presented in the first chapter, as well as several rhetorical devices used to get the message across and persuade the audience of the validity of the measures taken by the Government.

2.5. PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATION

Next, in the following section we will look into the communication style and strategies of French President Emanuel Macron and into how the media and the public perceived some of his statements. We chose to analyse the presidential addresses on two special occasions: the French national day message and end-of-year greetings.

In his Address to the Nation of 14 June 2020[62], President Emmanuel Macron announced the end of confinement in metropolitan France, with the exemption of Mayotte and Guyane. He used repetition to highlight that the state of confinement would end from the following day, a repetition which we presume had the purpose of reassuring citizens of the truthfulness of his statements: "A partir de demain, nous allons pouvoir tourner la page du premier acte…", "Dès demain, tout le territoire…", "Dès demain, il sera à nouveau possible de se déplacer…", "Dès demain, en hexagone comme en Outre-mer, les crèches, les écoles, les collèges se prépareront à accueillir à partir du 22 juin tous les élèves".

Macron's "warrior rhetoric", as it was classified by Florian Silnicki[63], is visible in the address, the president using phrases such as "La lutte contre l'épidémie n'est donc pas terminée mais je suis heureux, avec vous, de cette première victoire contre le virus", "Nous pouvons être fiers de ce qui a été fait et de notre pays", "Notre combat doit donc se poursuivre, s'intensifier pour permettre d'obtenir les diplômes et les emplois qui correspondent aux mérites et talents de chacun et lutter contre le fait que le nom, l'adresse, la couleur de peau réduisent encore trop souvent encore l'égalité des chances que chacun doit avoir." or "la lutte contre les inégalités dans notre pays". Even his body language, with his clenched fists, reinforced this rhetoric in certain instances. The president did not present only the virus as a danger that must be fought against, but also the inequalities and the

[62] Emmanuel Macron. "Adresse aux Français, 14 juin 2020." *Élysée.* 14.06.2020. https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/06/14/adresse-aux-francais-14-juin-2020 (accessed 01.10.2020).

[63] Martin Vaugoude. *op.cit.*

discrimination, using this context to address other issues that might concern citizens and making political remarks. The measures that had been taken in order to respond to the virus were enumerated with enthusiasm, vivacity and pride:

> "Nous n'avons pas à rougir mes chers compatriotes de notre bilan. Des dizaines de milliers de vies ont été sauvées par nos choix, par nos actions. Nous avons su doubler en quelques jours nos capacités de réanimation, organiser des transferts de centaines de patients entre régions et avec les pays voisins, approvisionner les commerces, réorienter notre production industrielle, inventer des solidarités nouvelles."

Compassion towards the deceased and their families was expressed briefly, but empathy was barely noticeable, especially since the reference to the deceased was made immediately after the one to victory:

> "La lutte contre l'épidémie n'est donc pas terminée mais je suis heureux, avec vous, de cette première victoire contre le virus. Et je veux ce soir penser avec émotion à nos morts, à leurs familles, dont le deuil a été rendu plus cruel encore en raison des contraintes de cette période."

Since the entire speech focused on the idea of victory, determination, empowerment and even control, an empathetic approach would have probably not served the purpose.

In order to persuade the population of the fact that the steps taken up until that moment had been the correct ones and to get them involved, Macron displayed a patriotic approach and even superiority in front of other nations:

> "Dans combien de pays tout cela a-t-il était fait? C'est une chance et cela montre la force de notre Etat et de notre modèle social." or

> "L'indépendance de la France pour vivre mieux exige aussi notre unité autour de la République […] Je nous vois nous diviser pour tout et parfois perdre le sens de notre Histoire. Nous unir autour du patriotisme républicain est une nécessité. Nous sommes une Nation où chacun, quelles que soient ses origines, sa religion doit trouver sa place. Est-ce vrai partout et pour tout le monde? Non."

To summarize the message conveyed by the president in an enthusiastic and even somewhat theatrical performance, the measures aimed at prioritizing health were the correct ones, in spite of the inevitable loopholes, there was a clear strategy on the next steps, the confinement period was over and the nation had the responsibility of working together for the wellbeing of everyone. This idea of empowerment and unity is recurrent throughout the entire speech: "Agissons ensemble avec toutes ces forces chevillées au corps. Ayons ensemble cette volonté de conquérir, cette énergie du jour qui vient" or "Nous allons retrouver pour partie notre art de vivre, notre goût de la liberté. En somme, nous allons retrouver pleinement la France."

A survey conducted by ELABE and Berger Levrault for BFMTV, on a sample of 1012 people evaluated as representative for the French population above 18, showed that only 47% of the French that saw, listened to and understood the Presidential address of 14 June considered it as being convincing. More precisely, 6% considered it being very convincing, 41% rather convincing, 33% rather not convincing and 20% not convincing at all. In the same survey, the respondents were asked to choose between the affirmations that they perceived as being true between "The crisis was poorly managed, there were problems that could have been

avoided" or "The crisis was managed as well as possible, given the circumstances". 57% opted for the first affirmation, 42% for the second and 1% did not express their opinions. Even though a higher percentage considered the crisis was poorly managed, there is an increase of 9% in the number of those that opted for a rather good management in comparison with a similar ELABE survey of May 2020[64].

Next, we will analyse President Emmanuel Macron's traditional speech for the end-of-year greetings, addressed to the French on 31 December 2020.[65] In his solemnly presented address, the President of the Republic reflected, among other aspects, on the COVID-19 epidemic that "changed our lives" in 2020. He thanked the French citizens, assuring them that "anything is possible in 2021."

His message is accompanied, similar to the previous address, not only by subtitles but also by a sign language interpreter. In his 15-minute speech, we can observe an extended usage of the 1st person singular pronoun, when talking about the measures taken in the context of the pandemic and what was required from the citizens. We can interpret that as a manner of not only justifying, but also of taking responsibility for the decisions and actions that were more institutional than personal.

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[64] ELABE et Berger Levrault. "Sondage ELABE et Berger Levrault pour BFMTV. Les Français et l'allocution d'Emmanuel Macron." 06 15.06.2020. https://elabe.fr/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20200615_elabe_bfmtv_les-francais-et-lallocution-demmanuel-macron.pdf (accessed 07.02.2021).

[65] Emmanuel Macron. "Vœux 2021 aux Français." *Élysée.* 31.12.2020. https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/12/31/voeux-2021-aux-francais (accessed 07.02.2021).

However, he took a more empathetic and inclusive approach when speaking on behalf of the citizens in paying tribute to the victims of the virus and expressing sympathy for those close to them:

> "En votre nom, j'ai ce soir une pensée pour les 64 000 victimes de ce virus, leurs familles et leurs proches. Des parents, des amis, des pans entiers de l'imaginaire français nous ont quitté ces derniers mois. "

Regardless of the solemn approach and the entire setting of the speech, typical for his presidential speeches, that seems to be in discord with inclusive approach and the message of being a president of all French citizens, note should be taken that the setting was more neutral, and his stance was slightly less formal than in the previous 31 Decembers.

The President made cautions, non-binding promises for the year to come and showed appreciation for the efforts and sacrifices of the French citizens in general, to all those who had been working to combat the pandemic, as well as to those activating in the sectors hardest hit by the crisis, such as hospitality, tourism or culture.

He ended his greetings, classified by some journalists as "minimalist"[66] or "very delicate"[67], in a positive note and with a typical appeal to nationalism: "Soyons fiers. Fiers d'être nous, les Français, la France. Voilà mes chers compatriotes. Bonne année à tous. […] Vive la République. Vive la France."

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[66] Clément Pétreault. "Les vœux minimalistes d'Emmanuel Macron". *Le Point*, 31.12.2020, https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/les-voeux-minimalistes-d-emmanuel-macron-31-12-2020-2407803_20.php. (accessed 10.02.2021).

[67] Grégoire Poussielgue. "Covid, réformes : les voeux très délicats de Macron pour 2021." *Les Echos*, 31.12.2020. https://www.lesechos.fr/politique-societe/emmanuel-macron-president/covid-reformes-les-voeux-tres-delicats-de-macron-pour-2021-1277426 (accessed 10.02.2021).

Some of the criticism that was brought to the Coronavirus crisis communication of Macron was related to him being "conflicting"; for example, at the beginning of the crisis, on 4 March 2020, he claimed that there was no reason, except for vulnerable categories, for people to change their habits of going out, but on 12 March he changed the tone, called the crisis as being very severe and announced the closing of schools.[68] Moreover, he was criticized for being "distant from the media" and not engaging in sufficient press conferences, or for "struggl[ing] to find the right tone to connect with the French people".[69]

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As a conclusion of the crisis communication in France during the COVID-19 pandemic, we will underline some of the positive and negative aspects resulting from our analysis.

We consider the website of the Ministry of Health as being comprehensive and well targeted to specific publics; linguistically diverse groups also have access to relevant information. The Minister of Health, Olivier Véran, demonstrated good communication skills, his messages being coherent, clear, persuasive and informative; the fact that sign language interpreters and visual representations supported his statements, as well as many of the statements delivered by other officials, is another piece of evidence for the attention paid to the diverse publics.

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[68] Amina Maaloum. "COVID-19: Macron's conflicting crisis communication." ModernDiplomacy, 31.03.2020. https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/03/31/covid-19-macrons-conflicting-crisis-communication/.(accessed 12.02.2021).

[69] Rym Momtaz. "Emmanuel Macron is social distancing … from the media." Politico, 17.07.2020. https://www.politico.eu/article/french-president-emmanuel-macron-social-distances-from-the-media/. (accessed 12.02.2021).

Gabriel Attal, one of the governmental spokespersons, focused his communication on the young population, which is an innovative and effective direction in this context, especially since many of the messages targeted mainly high-risk categories. Also, Prime-Minister Jean Castex delivered weekly statements and kept citizens informed at regular intervals; other positive aspects that we identified in his case are the fact that he put a lot of emphasis on the correlations between the actions of key public institutions, his speeches were informative, and the actions of the government constantly justified.

Regarding the presidential communication in this context, Emmanuel Macron conveyed to the citizens messages of confidence and control, empowering them and appealing to unity and patriotism; he also showed appreciation for the efforts of the citizens and of the health care providers in his addresses, and refrained from making non-realistic promises. A last strong point of the crisis communication in France that we consider useful to acknowledge is the direct interaction with the citizens through apps such as the WhatsApp Chatbot and the governmental collaboration with the social networks.

Some of the weak points that we identified in the crisis communication are the criticism that was directed by the Prime-Minister Jean Castex towards the citizens for not being sufficiently alert and for contributing to the spread of the virus, or him not following some of the recommendations that he was making. We also consider the warrior rhetoric of President Macron to have been overused, his statements to have been somewhat theatrical and his communicative approach rather distant in relation to the media and the general public. Lack of consistency in the messages of officials was also identified, although in limited instances, and, in some cases, a rather detached attitude.

Another unfavourable aspect is the communication style of former spokesperson Sibeth Ndiaye, predecessor of Gabriel Attal, who was perceived by the public and the media as somewhat dishonest and was criticized for not having an objective approach in her statements. Moreover, some of the initiatives of the Government to fight against the spread of fake news were also perceived in a negative way, as they were considered by some journalists as limiting their freedom of expression.

After this brief analysis of the Coronavirus crisis communication in France, in the next chapter we will scrutinize the same type of communication in the case of the United Kingdom.

3. COVID-19 COMMUNICATION - THE UNITED KINGDOM

For the second case study, we chose to analyse crisis communication in the United Kingdom, during the COVID- 19 pandemic, in the interval March 2020 - March 2021. Apart from the linguistic and socio-cultural reasons previously mentioned, crisis management and communication in the United Kingdom have raised a lot of interest beyond its borders, especially taking into consideration other extensively discussed events occurring in the country, such as the exit from the European Union or the recent tensions within the royal family.

The communication analysis in this chapter has as focal points the UK Government (Department of Health and Social Care included), the National Health Service, as well as the discourse of Queen Elizabeth II in this context.

3.1. TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND TRANSPARENCY

In an article on governmental communication and the politics of COVI-19 in Britain, Kenneth Newton, professor of comparative politics at the Department of Politics and International Relations at University of Southampton, talks about the "a long tradition of secrecy in British Government,

the example the Government set in its own behaviour, and its frequent claims that its policies were following the science." He considers that what led to a decrease in the trust that people put in the Government is not determined solely by how it behaved, but also by media information.[70] Newton explains that once SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies) expert views surpassed a certain level of confidentiality and released records showing that the Government was not entirely following scientific advice, the grounds of the decisions based on expert advice became questionable, such as the lockdown delays. Suspicion was also aroused by the inconsistency in including or not the number of care home deaths in the total number of daily deaths reported.

Newton also gives some examples of contradictory or ambiguous messages sent, such as those related to wearing masks in public places, or Government officials not respecting the rules that they try to impose on citizens, such as the case of British Prime Minister not respecting social distancing rules or stating that he was shaking hands, whilst the recommendations went against hand shaking. Another example of conflicting information was related to the capacity of PM Boris Johnson to be in charge of the Government, whilst there were statements according to which he was slowly recovering from the disease, and even contradictions in the information provided by the mainstream media.[71]

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[70] Kenneth Newton. "Government Communications, Political Trust and Compliant Social Behaviour: The Politics of Covid-19 in Britain". *The Political Quarterly*. Vol. 91, No. 3, July–September 2020: 502. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-923X.12901 (accessed 20.02.2021).

[71] *Ibidem*: 504-508.

Since there is already a tendency to rely less on expert opinion[72], coupling that tendency with the lack of certainty in what actually the real opinion of experts is and raising even more suspicion by Government officials not following expert advice, can only lead to less trust from the general public.

An interesting aspect pointed out by Newton is that the hypothesis that compliance with rules is determined by the trust in the Government was not confirmed in the case of the UK, as other factors, such as unwillingness or inability to change habits or the personal threat that they perceived, influenced their behaviour and in some instanced determined them to respect health safety regulations even before it was required by the Government. Newton concludes that "Trust in the Government and confidence in its policies is sometimes not essential, it seems, for public compliance with rules to protect personal and public interests. If the crisis concerns the personal interests of an individual, or their personal safety and that of their friends and family, they are likely to weigh up the risks and take what action they think is appropriate, irrespective of what they think of the media or the Government, or both".[73]

The *Whitehall Monitor*, a yearly publication issued by the Institute for Government that analyses data on the UK Government to assess its performance, revealed in its 2021 edition how the pandemic changed governmental decision-making, policy, spending and communication. The report shows that Coronavirus, alongside Brexit planning, required a more direct style of communication from the Government.

[72] For more details, see Chapter 1, subsection 1.1.
[73] Kenneth Newton, *op.cit.*: 510.

However, this more direct communication did not translate in a better, more understandable or more transparent one; for example, "key details were sometimes published late, causing confusion and uncertainty." On a more positive note, the publication of advice offered by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), starting from May 2020, is considered useful in showing transparency.[74]

The approach of Government officials of addressing the public directly, via press conferences, offering situation updates and announcing important decisions, did not lack criticism, as the agreement was to make major announcements in parliament. In order to address this criticism, important decisions were announced the same day, first to the House of Commons and then to the public. In spite of the increased transparency about how decisions are made, the messages were deemed to have been confusing and unclear at times.[75]

3.2. WEBSITE OF THE GOVERNMENT AND OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

In the case of the United Kingdom, we will focus both on the section dedicated to the Department of Health and Social Care as well as on the general website of the Government, since the general website has a section dedicated to COVID-19, which is the main subject of our analysis.

[74] Tim Durant *et al*. *Whitehall Monitor 2021*, Institute for Government. 2021:63. https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/whitehall-monitor-2021_0.pdf (accessed 05.04.2021).

[75] *Ibidem*: 66-70.

In an article on the perception of risk across cultures, where we made an analysis of the attitudes towards perceived risk in case of health emergency situations, we also analysed the section allocated to the COVID-19 pandemic on the website of the UK Government, in the interval March-April 2020.[76] Looking into the extent to which citizens were expected to obey regulations, we observed, in the case of the UK, that information on law enforcement and penalties for not obeying the rules was available repeatedly on the website of the Ministry of Health and Social Care:

> "The relevant authorities, including the police, have been given the powers to enforce them – including through fines and dispersing gatherings." or

> "if the police believe that you have broken these rules – or if you refuse to follow their instructions – a police officer may issue you with a fixed penalty notice for £60 (reduced to £30 if paid within 14 days)"

We have even identified stipulations on penalties for those that do not pay the fines:

> "For both individuals and companies, if you do not pay, you may also be taken to court, with magistrates able to impose potentially unlimited fines."[77]

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[76] Delia Pop – Flanja. "Cross-Cultural Differences in Risk Perception and Risk Communication. A Case Study on the COVID-19 Outbreak." *Redefining Community in Intercultural Context RCIC'20 - European Cultural Community Vol. 9.* Braşov: Henri Coandă Air Force Academy Publishing House, 2020: 68-74.

[77] UK Government. Department of Health & Social Care, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others (last accessed 30.03.2020).

Looking into the social distancing that was recommended by the authorities, in the UK the distance requirements was of two meters. We found that somewhat unexpected, as in France, where measures were stricter at that time, the recommendation in this respect was of one meter, and only in January 2021 it was increased to two meters. However, we can interpret this difference from a socio-cultural perspective as well, as proxemics is perceived differently in the UK and a high social distance between people was considered appropriate before the pandemic as well.

In March 2021, the evolution of the pandemic in the UK required a different approach. The first two sections on the website of the Government have been dedicated to COVID-19 and Brexit. From the very beginning of the front page, we could clearly observe the message "National lockdown: stay at home":

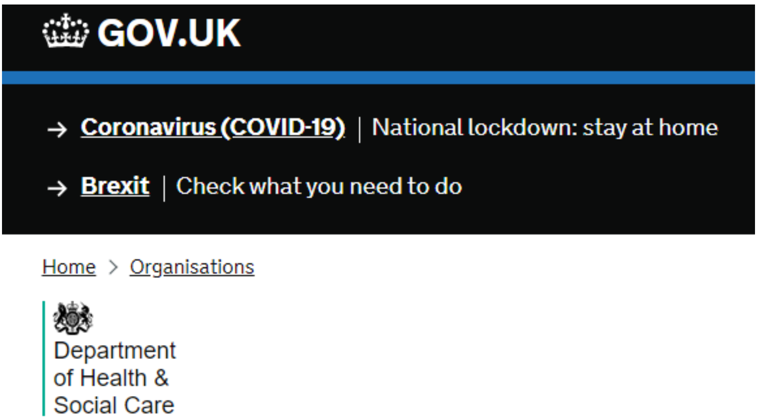


Figure 3.1. ***Frontpage - Official website Gov.UK***[78]

[78] UK Government. *Gov.uk*. https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus (last accessed 12.03.2021).

When accessing the "Coronavirus" section, three main messages were available, raising awareness of the danger:

- "Coronavirus (COVID-19) remains a serious threat across the country;
- Do not leave your home unless necessary.
- 1 in 3 people who have the virus have no symptoms, so you could be spreading it without knowing it."

This section also offered information about the rules to be followed, the Coronavirus symptoms and testing, guidance and support, recent and upcoming changes, education and childcare, international travel and vaccination. We can observe that the information related to vaccination was not highlighted as much as in the case of France, where it occupied the central position.

The information about vaccination addressed ethnic diversity as well, as it was offered in different languages, including Romanian, Polish, Turkish, Punjabi, Arabic and Bengali, and video testimonials of native speakers of those languages were also available, for a better understanding from those navigating the website.[79]

The website provided complex statistics on the Coronavirus, countrywide, by nation, by dosage, people tested positive, number of deaths, virus tests conducted, or other aspects that might have been of interest to the citizens. However, we did not identify any information related to vaccination by age group or gender, and we consider the section dedicated to statistics rather difficult to navigate.

[79] *Ibidem.*

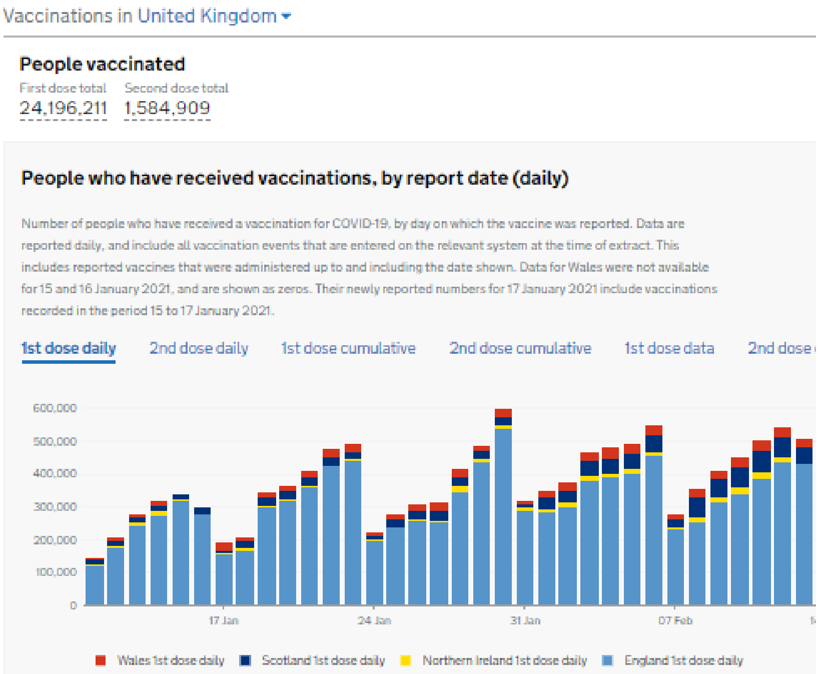


Figure 3.2. ***People who have received vaccinations.*** [80]

The above-quoted *Whitehall Monitor* report also unveils that the demand for Government information increased during the pandemic. The official webpage of the Government, GOV.UK, had a general increase in views, which peaked during certain intervals, such as:

- two weeks before the first lockdown from March 2020, as other countries had already introduced lockdowns;
- one week before the first lockdown, when school closure was announced, in May when school

[80] UK Government, Vaccinations in United Kingdom, https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/details/vaccinations (last accessed 13.03.2020).

reopening was announced and after Christmas, when school reopening was uncertain;

- just before the two lockdowns in March and January, as people were looking for information on the spread of the virus, on social distancing and quarantine rules;
- in the first weeks after the first lockdown announcement, when people were looking for information on financial support.[81]

3.3. GOVERNMENTAL AND PRIME MINISTERIAL COMMUNICATION

Together with other ministers and scientific advisers, Prime Minister Boris Johnson held regular, sometimes even daily, press conferences, on the state of affairs regarding the Coronavirus outbreak.

At the beginning of the pandemic, while drastic measures were being announced by many Governments, Johnson had a less cautious approach, pointing out that the county was "extremely well prepared" and recommending people to wash their hands as a precautionary measure. He even had a rather humoristic and personal approach in his anti-coronavirus advice, as, in a press conference delivered on 3 March 2020, he gave the iconic recommendation of singing the *Happy Birthday* song twice when washing hands:

> "[…] we must not forget what we can all do to fight this virus, which is to wash our hands, you knew I was going to say this, but wash our hands with soap and water. And forgive me for repeating this but there will be people who will be tuning into

[81] Tim Durant et al. *op.cit.*: 64.

this for the first time: wash your hands with soap and hot water for the length of time it takes to sing Happy Birthday twice.”[82]

Evidently, the measure proved to be highly insufficient, and the communication strategies of the Prime Minister needed to change.

In a study on the British governmental communication in the interval January-June 2020, Karen B. Sanders[83], professor of politics and communication at St Mary’s University, was critical towards the overestimation in the Prime Minister’s speeches of the country’s capacity to handle the crisis, towards not admitting errors in handling it and the general non-apologetic attitude. Sanders divided governmental and prime ministerial communication in five phases. In the interval January-February, governmental response was adapted to a low level or risk, the virus was presented mostly as a foreign problem. At the beginning of March, the level of risk was portrayed as moderate, the communication lead was mostly attributed to the Prime Minister and Government messages focused on the following aspects:

- “Wash hands otherwise life as normal: no to face masks, physical distancing, banning large public events.
- Many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time.

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[82] Boris Johnson. "Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 3 March 2020." *Gov.uk.* 03.03.2020 https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-coronavirus-press-conference-3-march-2020 (accessed 10.01.2021).

[83] Karen B. Sanders. "British Government communication during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic: learning from high reliability organizations". *Church, Communication and Culture*, 2020. 5/3: 356-377. https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2020.1824582 (accessed 10.02.2021).

- British common sense will prevail.
- UK has world-beating systems, excellent preparedness and resources."[84]

The second half of March brought a change in perspective; as the virus was declared a global pandemic, lockdown was imposed on most of the population and the messages shifted to "Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save lives."; this message was still in use in March 2021, to reassure the population that the Government was putting all efforts into solving the crisis and that the peak had passed. The fourth communication phase from May and the fifth one from June have both been described as portraying a high level of risk and by the message "Stay alert. Control the virus. Save lives." In the fourth phase, when face masks were also recommended, the public response was considered to be of confusion about the change in the messages to staying alert, outrage about how lockdown was handled and by a decline in the Prime Minister's approval ratings. The fifth phase brought an easing on lockdown but also more confusion about the Government's strategy.[85] Even though there have been variations in the message from this period onwards, in March 2021 the message, posted also on the first page of the website of the Government, was to stay at home, in the context of the national lockdown.

Since March 2020, Government officials offered daily briefings on the COVID-19 situation, many of which have been accompanied by sign language interpreters. To support and

[84] *Ibidem*: 366.
[85] *Ibidem*: 365-368.

illustrate the findings of the study above, we have also observed that the Downing Street lecterns at which Government officials delivered their speeches and daily briefings also contain, instead of the Royal coat of arms of the United Kingdom, slogans and safety messages to the public, such as:



Image 3.3. ***The message "stay home; protect the NHS; save lives", Coronavirus press conference (5 March 2021)***[86]



Image 3.4. ***The message "stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives", Boris Johnson gives daily UK Government coronavirus update (20 March 2020)***[87]

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[86] Matt Hancock. 10 Downing Street YouTube channel. *Matt Hancock, Coronavirus press conference (5 March 2021)*. 05.03.2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dEO2L91lx4 (accessed 10.03.2021).

[87] Boris Johnson. "Boris Johnson gives daily UK government coronavirus update - March 20." *ITV News YouTube channel*. 20.03.2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ALXzoTe-M0 (accessed 03.02.2021).

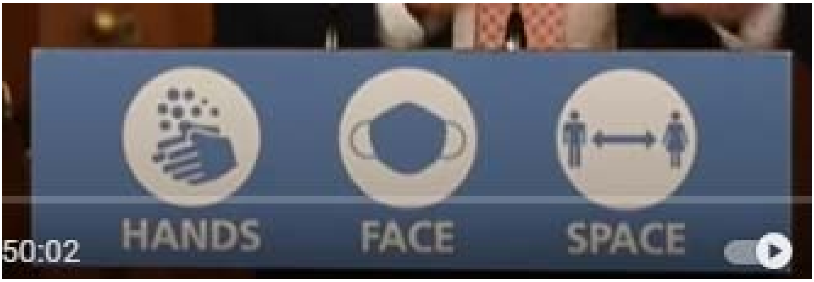


Image 3.5. ***Visual representations of basic sanitary measures of washing hands, wearing face masks and keeping social distancing, Coronavirus press conference (14 December 2020)***[88]



Image 3.6. ***The message "stay alert; control the virus; save lives", Coronavirus press conference (23 June 2020)***[89]

[88] Matt Hancock. 10 Downing Street. *Coronavirus press conference (14 December 2020).* 14.12.2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHcXsNs4_9E (accessed 10.03.2021).

[89] Boris Johnson. 10 Downing Street. *Boris Johnson, Coronavirus press conference (23 June 2020).* 23.06.2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiplUCnwc5A (accessed 10. 03 2021).



Image 3.7. ***the nhs.uk/coronavirus website, UK Government virus update (16 March 2020)*[90]**

Next, we will try to identify to what extent the response strategies recommended in the crisis communication theories presented in the first chapter of this paper have been used in the speeches of the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. We will focus our analysis on several key speeches delivered in March 2020, when lockdown was imposed for the first time, and in January 2021, when the third national lockdown came into force.

In a press conference on 16 March 2020, when the Prime Minister made a statement on the Coronavirus, he justified the actions and the measures taken by pointing out the severity of the situation and the scientific advice. This technique of justification (proposed in the crisis communication response models of Beboit and Coombs) is visible all throughout his speech. The justification of more strict measures was also required by the fact that information had been contradictory from the beginning of the outbreak and it was even different than the one provided one week before this speech:

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[90] Boris Johnson, Chris Whitty and Patrick Vallance. "Stop non-essential contact with others: UK Government virus update, 16 March 2020". *Channel 4 News*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTZwbEoDC1c (accessed 10.03.2021).

> "As we said last week, our objective is to delay and flatten the peak of the epidemic by bringing forward the right measures at the right time, so that we minimise suffering and save lives. And everything we do is based scrupulously on the best scientific advice. […] Today, we need to go further, because according to SAGE [the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies] it looks as though we're now approaching the fast growth part of the upward curve."

The speech contains, nevertheless, elements of ambiguity, in spite of its well organized, numerical structure. Hence, it is not very clear what the citizens were expected to do, especially those without symptoms, whether staying at home was compulsory or just highly recommended, or what was deemed essential and non-essential contact:

> "So, first, we need to ask you to ensure that if you or anyone in your household has one of those two symptoms, then you should stay at home for fourteen days. […] If necessary, you should ask for help from others for your daily necessities. And if that is not possible, then you should do what you can to limit your social contact when you leave the house to get supplies. And even if you don't have symptoms and if no one in your household has symptoms, there is more that we need you to do now. So, second, now is the time for everyone to stop non-essential contact with others and to stop all unnecessary travel. […] And again the reason for doing this in the next few days, rather than earlier or later, is that this is going to be very disruptive for people who have such conditions, and difficult for them, but, I believe, it's now necessary."[91]

[91] Boris Johnson. "Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 16 March 2020." *Gov.uk.* 16.03.2020. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-16-march-2020 (accessed 10.09.2020).

In a statement delivered on 23 March 2020, Johnson gave clearer and more explicit instructions. He placed the crisis in a wider context as a form of sharing responsibility, and highlighted that it was a worldwide problem that the other countries had difficulties in handling as well. We can also identify elements of the *Extended Parallel Process Model* of Kim Witte[92], as he communicated the severity of the situation and the increased susceptibility to disease or death (e.g. "as we have seen elsewhere, in other countries that also have fantastic health care systems, that is the moment of real danger.", or "if too many people become seriously unwell at one time, the NHS will be unable to handle it - meaning more people are likely to die, not just from Coronavirus but from other illnesses as well."), but also the efficiency of the plan proposed (e.g. "And yet it is also true that there is a clear way through") and self-efficacy (e.g. "From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction - you must stay at home", or "The people of this country will rise to that challenge. And we will come through it stronger than ever. We will beat the Coronavirus and we will beat it together."). Ingratiation can also be observed as response strategy in this speech, as the Prime Minister showed appreciation for the efforts of the transport workers, health sector or supermarket staff.[93]

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, there is a constant emphasis in the British Coronavirus governmental

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[92] See Chapter 1.

[93] Boris Johnson, "Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 23 March 2020." *Gov.uk.* 23.03.2020. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-on-coronavirus-23-march-2020 (accessed 10.09.2020).

communication on the importance of obeying the rules and the repercussions of not doing that. This is visible in the Johnson's speech as well: "If you don't follow the rules the police will have the powers to enforce them, including through fines and dispersing gatherings."[94] So, on the one hand, we have the message of empowering citizens and making them an active part in the fight against the pandemic, but, on the other hand, we have the message of confidence in the course of action targeted towards flattening the curve and of taking punitive measures, should the requirements not be followed.

This reassurance that the measures taken would be effective proved however to have not been realistic, as the Prime Minster took a lot of "U turns" in the anti-coronavirus strategy and made promises he was unable keep, such as turning the tide in 12 weeks, in March 2020, the launching of a "test and trace" system by 1 June, or not restricting Christmas travels.[95]

So, the new national lockdown that he announced in his 4 January 2021 address to the nation did not find him in a favourable position from a credibility and reputational point of view. To justify the following as well as the previous measures, the Prime Minister placed the pandemic in a different context, the one of a new, faster spreading, variant of the virus. This type of response can be associated with the transcendence image restoration strategy of reducing offensiveness of Benoit[96]:

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[94] *Ibidem*.

[95] Arnaud Siad. "The many U-turns of Boris Johnson." *CNN News*, 20.12.2020. https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/20/europe/boris-johnson-u-turns/index.html (accessed 10.01.2021).

[96] See Chapter 1.

> "Since the pandemic began last year, the whole United Kingdom has been engaged in a great national effort to fight COVID. And there is no doubt that in fighting the old variant of the virus, our collective efforts were working and would have continued to work. But we now have a new variant of the virus. It has been both frustrating and alarming to see the speed with which the new variant is spreading."[97]

We will focus next on some new elements of the communication and crisis response strategy displayed in Boris Johnson's addresses to the nation, in the above-mentioned speech. In this address, he directed citizens towards the reliable sources where they could find more details about the requirements, namely the Coronavirus section available on the Government's website. Also, more empathy seems to be shown towards the victims and their families ("My thoughts are with all those who have lost loved ones.") or towards the parents, as he was announcing the closing of schools ("I completely understand the inconvenience and distress this late change will cause millions of parents and pupils up and down the country"). Another image restoration strategy used by Johnson is the differentiation, as he underlined British exceptionalism and how the UK stands out from the other countries in Europe: "So far, we in the UK have vaccinated more people than the rest of Europe combined. With the arrival today of the UK's own Oxford Astra Zeneca vaccine, the pace of vaccination is accelerating." The closing message is the same "stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives."[98]

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[97] Boris Johnson. "Prime Minister's address to the nation: 4 January 2021." *Gov.uk.* 04.01.2021. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-address-to-the-nation-4-january-2021 (accessed 10.01.2021).

[98] *Ibidem.*

Regarding the rhetorical figures used in the three speeches, we can observe devices such as the tricolon (e.g. "because there won't be enough ventilators, enough intensive care beds, enough doctors and nurses"), the anaphora (e.g. "You should not be meeting friends. […] You should not be meeting family members who do not live in your home. You should not be going shopping except for essentials like food and medicine."), the antithesis life – death, losing vs. saving lives, (e.g. "save many, many thousands of lives"/"many lives will sadly be lost")[99], or the hypophora (e.g. "And if you ask, why are we doing this now, why now, why not earlier, or later? Why bring in this very draconian measure?")[100].

In a Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism report on the lessons that can be learnt, from a communication point of view, from the first to the second wave of the Coronavirus in the UK, researchers Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos and Felix Simon concluded that most of the UK public surveyed are informed about the virus, are cautious and mostly follow governmental guidelines, but a large minority feel that they were not clearly explained what they should do in response to the pandemic. Still, trust in the Government as source of information dropped and "an estimated 20 million people do not feel that the news media and/or the Government have explained what they can do in

[99] Examples retrieved form Boris Johnson. "Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 23 March 2020." *Gov.uk.* 23.03.2020. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-on-coronavirus-23-march-2020 (accessed 10.09.2020).

[100] Examples retrieved from Boris Johnson. "Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 16 March 2020." *Gov.uk.* 03 16.03.2020. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-16-march-2020 (accessed 10.09.2020).

response to the pandemic." The percentage of those "infodemically vulnerable", or predisposed to misinformation or disinformation, has grown from 6%, at the beginning of the crisis, to 15% by late August. The Government does not seem to be perceived necessarily as a reliable source of information, as 38% or the respondents surveyed in August 2020 "were very or extremely concerned about false or misleading information from the UK Government about coronavirus". The authors recommend a higher focus of the general public on less politicized sources, such as the NHS, experts, scientist or doctors.[101]

3.4. NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

Another important actor in the healthcare system in the UK is the above-mentioned NHS (National Health Service), which encompasses the public healthcare systems in the United Kingdom[102]. More precisely, there are four systems, representing each national region, namely NHS England, NHS Scotland, NHS Wales, and Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland. The first section of the NHS website was dedicated to Coronavirus. The first elements, available on the upper side of this section, referred to vaccination bookings, availability of PCR tests for those with symptoms and of rapid lateral flow tests for those without symptoms (the last two redirecting the user to the website of the Government). Other sections on the front page provided information on symptoms, self-isolation,

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[101] Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos and Felix Simon. *Communications in the coronavirus crisis: lessons for the second wave.* Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. 26.10. 2020. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/communications-coronavirus-crisis-lessons-second-wave (accessed 10.02.2021).

[102] National Health Service UK. https://www.nhs.uk/ (accessed 10.03.2021).

vaccination, tracing and testing, people at risk, long term effects, social distancing and taking part in research.

This last section represents an evidence of the strategy of empowering citizens and giving them the possibility to actively participate in finding a solution to the pandemic. The UK is a particular case from this point of view, as it is the only country of those analysed in this study that was the provider of one of the three vaccines available at that time – Oxford-AstraZeneca. In the context of rumours about the inefficiency of the vaccine for some people, or even of severe side effects, more accountability seems to fall on the UK, which strongly encouraged its citizens to get inoculated with the Oxford-AstraZeneca jab. Prime Minister Boris Johnson also got vaccinated with Oxford-AstraZeneca to set an example, whilst urging the public to do the same. In order to reassure people of the safety of the vaccine, besides expert opinion such as Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) who concluded that there was no proven link between the jab and the blood clots, another approach was to counterbalance the potentially negative side effects with the rising infection rates and with the more severe effects of contracting the disease. Apart from Prime Minister Johnson, this approach was adopted in other addresses as well, such as the ones of Chris Whitty, chief medical officer for England, or Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden. According to BBC News, French Prime Minister Jean Castex would also receive the AstraZeneca vaccine, to reassure the French public of its reliability.[103]

[103] BBC News. "Covid vaccine: PM to have AstraZeneca jab as he urges public to do the same." *BBC News*. 19.03.2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-56452412 (accessed 20.03.2021).

3.5. SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Next, we will look into the crisis communication strategy of Matthew Hancock, British Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. Generally confident in the measures taken by the Government in fighting against the pandemic, Hancock also admitted to having made some mistakes. In a highly debated interview given in February 2021 for the ITV show *Good Morning Britain*,[104] he admitted that:

> "Sure, of course, we've made mistakes, absolutely. When we first put out the guidance for funerals in the first peak it was interpreted as being so tight that even your spouse couldn't go to the funeral of somebody who'd died of Coronavirus. Now, that was wrong, and we changed it. Absolutely, we've been learning."

However, the mistakes that he admitted to are related to the measures being interpreted as too strict, whereas criticism was directed mostly to the fact that the measures taken were not strict enough and that the herd immunity tentative had failed. In spite of the tense context, as the interviewers Piers Morgan and Susanna Reid were very inquisitive and critical of the measures taken by Hancock and his team, we believe that some of the responses that he gave, even taking into consideration his purpose of justifying the measures and defending his team, were inappropriate. For example, the Health Secretary was criticized for the shortage of protective

104 ITV YouTube channel. "Piers Erupts as Matt Hancock Claims His Team Should Be Thanked for Their Work in the Pandemic." *Good Morning Britain*. 23.02.2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDlc-wLVF-8 (accessed 10.03.2021).

equipment and for not apologizing, after he had been found guilty for breaking the law by not publishing details of Coronavirus-related contracts. He defended himself by bringing forward the unprecedented aspect of the crisis and his priority of saving lives, which could be considered as plausible justifications, but claiming that he did not find necessary to apologize over law breaking could be perceived as disrespectful towards the citizens, especially in the context in which they were strongly encouraged to follow Coronavirus-related regulations and restrictions.

> "I won't apologise because to apologise would imply that I'd do something differently […] given the choices we were faced with in April and May when there were very, very serious problems with access to PPE and some people were going without and the team were working so hard… to have taken some of the team off that lifesaving work in order to complete the paperwork on time instead of just [being] over a fortnight late that would have been wrong."[105]

To look into Hancock's communication style in his regular addresses on the pandemic situation, we will analyse a speech that the Secretary of State delivered at the Downing Street Coronavirus briefing of 11 January 2021[106], when he presented the vaccine delivery plan, together with Steve Powis, the National Medical Director of NHS England. As communication strategies, we can identify the nationalistic

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[105] *Ibidem.*

[106] Matt Hancock. "Speech by Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock at the Downing Street coronavirus briefing." *Gov.UK.* 11.01.2021. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/health-and-social-care-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-11-january-2021 (accessed 15.03.2021).

approach ("I want us to have that great British summer" or "I've always believed in British science, and that it can find the solutions to get us out of this"), the positive differentiation from other countries ("And we've protected more people through vaccinations than all other countries in Europe put together."), the display of appreciation for the support received from people working in social care, retired clinicians, pharmacists, the armed service, the Royal Voluntary Service, or the empathetic approach of expressing sympathy for the victims and their families ("And our hearts go out to the family and the loved ones of each and every person who has died of coronavirus.").

The speech is also informative, as Hancock presented the number of people affected, of those vaccinated and the vaccine delivery plan. His presentation was also visually supported by a slide show of the hospitalized people, whose number was "higher than ever", and by a sign language interpreter. Hence, we can observe that the message went mostly in the direction of reassuring people that a clear plan was in action, of making them aware of the danger and of the risk of being exposed to it ("Act like you have the virus"), and of encouraging them to take action, which consisted mostly in obeying the rules and staying at home. The effort from the citizens was presented as being small in comparison with the outcomes of that effort ("Please do your bit and help keep the NHS strong, while we roll up our sleeves and make this ambitious plan a reality. So please, stay at home to protect the NHS and save lives.").

In order to respond to the scepticism related to the vaccine, as it was considered by some that its rapid arrival could have been the result of insufficient testing, Hancock justified its efficiency by accentuating the previous advanced

studies on similar viruses and on the local research combined with the global one:

> “Thanks to our investment in Ebola and MERS vaccines several years ago, the Jenner Institute at Oxford University was able to repurpose existing work, and move so fast to develop a successful vaccine. But our search has been global throughout, so while we’ve backed the scientists who’ve been working on this here at home, we’ve also worked with international partners like Pfizer and BioNTech, to ensure that we were the first country in the world to authorise, and use the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.”[107]

3.6. SPOKESPERSONS AND DIRECTORS OF COMMUNICATION

Next, in line with the analysis made in the case of France, we will look into the communication strategies and styles of UK spokespersons and directors of communication, although they were less visible in the media than their French counterparts.

James Slack occupied the position of official spokesman to the Prime Minister until January 2021, when he was appointed Downing Street’s director of communications. Slack, with a career of 20 years in journalism and having been the spokesperson of both Theresa May and Boris Johnson, was described as “softly spoken, fair and polite”, as opposed to his predecessor, Lee Cain, whose communication style was described as “abrasive and often confrontational”.[108] However,

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[107] *Ibidem.*

[108] Ian Griggs, Jonathan Owen and John Harrington. "Exceptional communicator with a touch of Machiavelli: Who is ‘Slacky’, Downing Street’s new comms chief?" *PR Week*, 18.11.2020. https://www.prweek.com/

Slack resigned from this position in March 2021, and opted for the position of deputy director for the British newspaper *The Sun*. In January 2021, Jamie Davies was appointed official spokesman to the Prime Minister, but we did not manage to identify and feedback on his communication style from the media or the public.

An interesting aspect to analyse is the manner in which information was offered to the public by the spokespersons and the Government officials. For the declared purpose of being more transparent and open, the Government expressed the intention of holding daily televised press briefings in the detriment of the pre-pandemic lobby system, in which accredited political journalists were offered twice-daily non-televised briefings from a civil service press officer. Paul Harrison, Downing Street press secretary under Theresa May, who also showed appreciation for the above-mentioned James Slack, stated that "televised press briefings significantly alter the way the Government will look and feel to the public". According to Harrison, some effects of holding daily televised briefings might be that they would draw more accountability on Downing Street officials, or that there would be days when not too much information was going to be available and the televised version will be impactful on the public.[109]

article/1700377/exceptional-communicator-touch-machiavelli-slacky-downing-streets-new-comms-chief (accessed 10.12.2020).

109 Paul Harrison. "No 10 is changing the way it does politics – and it's a major risk." *The Guardian*, 07.07.2020. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/07/daily-televised-government-briefings-no-10-downing-street-press (accessed 10.12.2020).

3.7. QUEEN ELIZABETH II

Queen Elizabeth II made her first public remarks on the Coronavirus pandemic on 19 March 2020. Buckingham Palace released a statement from the Queen, in which she encouraged citizens to act as a community and she reminded them of the historical commitment to a common goal:

> "At times such as these, I am reminded that our nation's history has been forged by people and communities coming together to work as one, concentrating our combined efforts with a focus on the common goal."

She also expressed gratitude for "the expertise and commitment of [the] scientists, medical practitioners and emergency and public services" but did not make any promises on potential remedies and swift solutions to surpassing "the period of great concern and uncertainty".[110]

Since social bonds tend to grow stronger in times of uncertainty, leaders should build community and encourage people "to come together under common values of mutual support and achievement" and this is precisely what Queen Elizabeth II is considered to have done in her speech of 5 April.[111]

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[110] Queen Elizabeth II. "A message from Her Majesty the Queen, 19th March 2020." *Buckingham Palace.* 19.03.2020. https://www.royal.uk/message-her-majesty-queen-19th-march-2020 (accessed 05.12.2020).

[111] Ana Mendy, Mary Lass Stewart, and Kate VanAkin. "A leader's guide: Communicating with teams, stakeholders, and communities during COVID-19." *The path to the next normal. Leading with resolve through the coronavirus pandemic.* McKinsey&Company. 2020: 30. https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/a-leaders-guide-communicating-with-teams-stakeholders-and-communities-during-covid-19 (accessed 10.02.2021).

Except for her regular Christmas broadcasts, the address of Queen Elizabeth II to the British citizens on 5 April 2020 was the fifth time she spoke directly to the public in a televised speech. The other four times when she delivered such speeches was in 1991 at the beginning of the land war in Iraq, in 1997 before the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 2002 at the death of the Queen Mother and in 2012 at her Diamond Jubilee.[112]

According to James O'Rourke, management expert at the University of Notre Dame, the speech of Queen Elizabeth II was accurate, concise, timely and to the point, and with a more "more rational, calming voice than her prime minister, Boris Johnson". O'Rourke added that the speech "was more than just encouragement, though, it was direction to the people of Britain from their head of state. And, in many ways, recordings of this speech will serve as an instructive tool to students of public speaking for a number of years."[113]

However, without considering the interventions of the Prime Minister as flawless and acknowledging that comparisons between the communication approaches of Boris Johnson and Queen Elizabeth II are pertinent and justifiable, note should be taken that, apart from the personal styles of each of them, the differences in the roles that they played in solving the crisis and the expectations of the citizens from them inevitably contributed to the way in which they

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112 Margaret Ryan. "Coronavirus: The four other times the Queen has addressed the nation." *BBC News*. 05.04.2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52173825 (accessed 10.01.2021).

113 James O'Rourke apud Shannon Roddel. "In rare speech on coronavirus, Queen Elizabeth provides calming voice." *Notre Dame News*, 06.04.2020. https://news.nd.edu/news/in-rare-speech-on-coronavirus-queen-elizabeth-provides-calming-voice-expert-says/(accessed 10.02.2020).

conveyed their messages to the public. We can presume that more action was expected from the Prime Minister and he was perceived more accountable for the flaws in handling the crisis; hence, a less calm tone can be understandable. Moreover, the Prime Minister offered, in certain intervals, daily briefings on the Coronavirus situation, which means that less time was allocated for preparing the speeches.

Regarding the content of her speech, the Queen began by acknowledging the difficulties caused by the pandemic and continued by thanking the NHS, care and essential workers. The words "pandemic", "Coronavirus", "COVID-19" or "crisis" have not been pronounced in her speech, probably because of the strong negative connotation that they might have or in order not to particularize the crisis and to set it in a wider historical context. The message of appreciation and gratitude was not addressed just on her behalf, but on behalf of the entire nation:

> "I am sure the nation will join me in assuring you that what you do is appreciated and every hour of your hard work brings us closer to a return to more normal times."

She also thanked people for staying at home and, in doing so, for contributing to the protection of the vulnerable and to saving lives, message in line with those delivered by PM Boris Johnson. She placed emphasis on the idea of unity and togetherness and she appealed to the sense of pride of the British citizens, to the "national spirit":

> "I hope in the years to come everyone will be able to take pride in how they responded to this challenge. And those who come after us will say the Britons of this generation were as strong as any. That the attributes of self-discipline, of quiet good-

> humoured resolve and of fellow-feeling still characterise this country."

In trying to connect the past, the present and the future, she recalled the first broadcast made in 1940, together with her sister, and the "painful sense of separation from their loved ones" that characterized both periods. The differences highlighted consist in the scientific development and in the fact that the entire globe is struggling to find a solution to this unprecedented threat. She closed her speech with a reassurance that everyone's effort would end in a success against the pandemic:

> "We will succeed - and that success will belong to every one of us. We should take comfort that while we may have more still to endure, better days will return: we will be with our friends again; we will be with our families again; we will meet again. But for now, I send my thanks and warmest good wishes to you all."[114]

Reference to World War II was made by the Queen not only by recalling her first speech of 1940, but also by quoting Vera Lynn's wartime song "We'll met again", words mentioned by the Queen at the end of her address. The song is believed to have captured "the heartbreak and optimism of Britain at war".[115] For the first time in her reign, in order to increase the impact of her reassuring messages and to boost the morale of the citizens, at the initiative of Ocean Outdoor media

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[114] Queen Elizabeth II. "Sections form the speech retrieved from BBC News - Coronavirus: The Queen's broadcast in full." *BBC News*. 05.04.2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52176208 and https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-52174772 (accessed 03.02.2021).

[115] Mark Savage. "We'll Meet Again: The story of Dame Vera Lynn's wartime classic." *BBC News*, 18.06.2020 https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-53079190 (accessed 03.02.2021).

company, sections from the Queen's speech of 5 April were displayed on London's Piccadilly Lights, the "We will meet again" quote included. The messages did not have only on-the-spot visibility, as they had been posted and retweeted "tens of thousands of times within 24 hours"[116].



Figure 3.8. ***Quotation from the 5 April speech of Queen Elizabeth II, posted on London's Piccadilly Lights.***[117]

On 25 December 2020, the annual Christmas address of Queen Elizabeth II to the British citizens was broadcast, accompanied by videos and images illustrating the events reiterated by the Queen. The speech, with strong religious references and sympathy expressed for those suffering or at loss, revolved around the ideas of light, hope, unity and solidarity. The word "light" was pronounced eight times in

116 Emmet McGonagle. "Queen's virus message on London's Piccadilly Lights wins plaudits." *Campaign*, 09.04.2020. https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/queens-virus-message-londons-piccadilly-lights-wins-plaudits/1679849 (accessed 04.02.2021).

117 *Ibidem.*

her five minutes speech, but reference to the idea of light was made also through words such as “shine”, “lit”, “fireworks”, “lamp”, “star” or “dawn”. The warrior rhetoric is also present, this time with reference to the Unknown Warrior of World War I, portrayed more as a symbol of solidarity and selflessness than a combatant. Reference to selflessness is made through the parable of the Good Samaritan as well. Diversity and equality are also addressed in the speech:

> “People of all faiths have been unable to gather as they would wish for their festivals, such as Passover, Easter, Eid, and Vaisakhi. But we need life to go on. Last month, fireworks lit up the sky around Windsor, as Hindus, Sikhs and Jains celebrated Diwali, the festival of lights, providing joyous moments of hope and unity — despite social distancing.”, or
>
> “Good Samaritans have emerged across society showing care and respect for all, regardless of gender, race or background, reminding us that each one of us is special and equal in the eyes of God.”[118]

We will end this section with some remarks on the usage of this warrior metaphor, which was even more heavily present in the discourse of French President Emmanuel Macron. Whereas the association pandemic – war can send a message of empowerment, active participation and nationalism, it has been noted that it can also require citizens to go beyond their role of citizens and take more the role of “soldiers in a conflict”, which can place them more in the

[118] Sections retrieved form the speech of Queen Elizabeth II. "Christmas Broadcast 2020." *The Royal Household*. 24.12.2020. https://www.royal.uk/christmas-broadcast-2020 (accessed 03.02.2021).

spectrum of obedience than solidarity.[119] This can justify why many of the discourses analysed also make reference to solidarity, probably in order for the citizens not to perceive the war metaphor as negative and binding.

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At the end of our chapter on crisis communication in the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 pandemic, we will summarize some of the positive and negative aspects resulting from our analysis.

One of the positive aspects that we observed in relation to Coronavirus communication is that the GOV.UK website offered complex statistics on different aspects that might be of interest to the citizens. Moreover, the data on vaccination addressed ethnic and linguistic diversity, and the video testimonials of native speakers of minority languages made the messages even more targeted. Likewise, many of the briefings of Government official have been doubled in sign language. The fact that safety messages to the public were placed on the lecterns during official statements increased their visibility, and, even if we did not find any supposing evidence, probably their impact as well.

Another positive aspect is that Prime-Minister Boris Johnson made regular, sometimes even daily, press statements on the state of affairs regarding the pandemic, which showcased openness and transparency. Also, he addressed the concerns of the citizens related to the possible side-effects of the vaccine not only by presenting expert opinion, but also by

[119] Costanza Musu. "War metaphors used for COVID-19 are compelling but also dangerous." The Conversation. 08.04.2020. https://theconversation.com/war-metaphors-used-for-covid-19-are-compelling-but-also-dangerous-135406 (accessed 16.03.2021).

counterbalancing the potential side-effects of vaccines with the confirmed severe effects of the disease. We consider that his rather humoristic advice of singing the Happy Birthday song twice when washing hands, although occasionally ridiculed, was a good way of personalizing the message, making it easy to be remembered and suitable for a group of the population rarely addressed in these instances – the children.

Apart from the general appeal to nationalism and solidarity, or the appreciation expressed for the efforts of citizens, health-care providers and other workers from essential sectors, cultural aspects have also been taken into consideration in the governmental communication strategy, for example with reference to social distancing recommendations or to punitive measures for not respecting the restrictions imposed. Another aspect that should be brought into discussion is the communication of Queen Elizabeth II, who delivered a televised speech to boost the morale of the citizens; we consider it to be even more impactful, since she rarely has such interventions.

On a less positive note, especially at the beginning of the crisis, accusations have been brought against a certain ambiguity on what was required from the citizens or against abrupt changes in official recommendations from taking basic precautionary measures to severe ones, such as national lockdowns. Also, previously quoted studies showed a higher predisposition of the citizens to disinformation, from March to August 2020, and a decrease of trust in Government.

Another negative aspect of the Coronavirus crisis communication is the non-apologetic approach of officials such as Prime-Minister Boris Johnson or the British Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matthew Hancock. Even if the crisis *per se* can be put in a wider context in order to show

lack of guilt or to justify restrictive measures, other actions, such as making unrealistic promises (in the case of Johnson) or not respecting the law on information transparency procedures (in the case of Hancock), do require a more apologetic attitude.

We will end our analysis with a questionable communicative approach, which was also classified as positive, namely the daily briefings of Government officials. Even though they show transparency, we agree with the observation that some are not sufficiently consistent in new information and that, as a consequence, might become less impactful on the general public.

Next, we will continue the presentation of our research with the third and last case study, on the COVID-19 crisis communication in Romania.

4. COVID-19 COMMUNICATION - ROMANIA

For the third case study, we chose to analyse the COVID-19 crisis communication in Romania, for the same interval, March 2020 – March 2021. This case study is relevant and useful, as research pertaining to crisis communication in Romania, especially in the public sector, is rather limited and the way the pandemic crisis has been handled from a communicational perspective has little international visibility.

In this chapter, we will examine several aspects related to trust in Government and how it has affected the perception of the crisis, the manner in which the spread of fake news was countered and the information available on the websites of the Government, the Presidency and the Ministry of Health. Moreover, we will look into the discourses of officials such as the President, the two Prime-Ministers in office in this interval and the Head of the Department of Emergency Situations.

4.1. FAKE NEWS AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Apart from the pandemic *per se*, during the Coronavirus outbreak governments also needed to fight against the spread of false information. According to Dumitrița Holdiș, project manager for the Romanian Centre for Independent Journalism (CJI), one of these measures consisted in the removal of online

content such as certain articles and websites, and the body in charge of this activity was the National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communications (ANCOM). Holdiș considered that agency was not well equipped to deal with disinformation and that its decisions could not be questioned because of the emergency state that had been imposed. Another means of fighting against the spread of false news was the website "stirioficiale.ro", a "portal for the dissemination of all official communication relating to COVID-19. At first, this just carried press releases and official statements already published on the website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and that of other ministries. It now also hosts a data section and carries useful advice on coronavirus-related topics". The position of the Government on the role of ANCOM is criticized by Holdiș, as it advantages press institutions that cooperate with the state and it lacks transparency, as the names of its members were kept confidential. Also, form her point of view, the agency went beyond its role and restricted access to video footages illustrating the poor quality of the health equipment of the medical personnel, endangering the freedom of expression.[120]

Another measure taken by the Romanian Government in order to fight disinformation was to post on the section dedicated to vaccination from the Government's website a sub-section on the top ten most deceiving pieces of information, together with explanations for why that information was not correct. We will not insist on the explanations given against the false information, but we

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120 Dumitrița Holdiș. "Romania: Coronavirus and the media." *European Journalism Obervatory*, 26.05.2020. https://en.ejo.ch/ethics-quality/romania-coronavirus-and-the-media (accessed 05.03.2021).

consider relevant to present some of the aspects that that Romanians were mostly disinformed about:

1. “Pharmaceutical companies hide the dangers associated with vaccines. ”
2. “Vaccine safety data are often manufactured.”
3. “An unauthorized vaccine will be used in Romania.”
4. “Vaccination will be compulsory.”
5. “Romanian citizens will be the last ones to get the vaccine.”
6. “Romania pays more for the anti-COVID-19 vaccines than the other European countries.”
7. “Some people will make use of their influence and contacts to gain an advantage in the vaccination process.”
8. “Vaccination will be done with the army and the police.”
9. “Politicians will get the vaccine before the citizens.”
10. “Romanians will have to pay for the vaccine.”[121]

As we can observe, out of these ten assumptions, only three are associated to medical dangers, whereas the others are associated to fair treatment, financial aspects and freedom of choice. Even the three health-related rumours are more about concealed information and double standard in the quality of the vaccines offered to Romanians than about the potentially negative effects of the vaccine *per se*.

According to a survey published by the business data platform *Statista*, conducted on 800 respondents and issued in March 2020, the most trusted institutions since the outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Romania in 2020 are the Army

[121] Government of Romania. "Top 10 informații înșelătoare." *Government of Romania official website.* n.d. https://vaccinare-covid.gov.ro/vaccinarea-sars-cov-2/top-10-informatii-inselatoare/ [author’s translation from Romanian] (accessed 07.03.2021).

(88,2%), the Ministry of Health (77,5%) and the Police (72.1%), followed by the European Union, the Presidency, the City Hall, the Government and the Parliament. According to the publisher of the study, Justina Alexandra Sava, the confidence in the Ministry of Health had increased since the beginning of the outbreak.

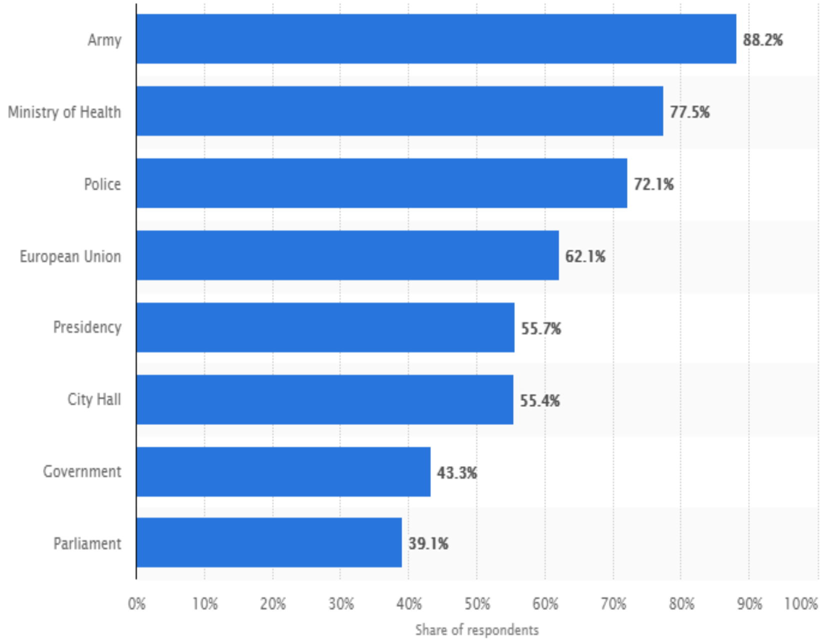


Figure 4.1. ***Level of trust in the institutions since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Romania 2020***[122]

The very high level of trust in the Army is also supported by the results of a public opinion poll, conducted between 12 April and 3 May 2019, on a sample of 1050 people, by the

[122] Justina Alexandra Sava. "Most trusted institutions since the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) in Romania in 2020." *Statista.* 14.12.2020. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1105980/trust-in-institutions-since-covid-19/ (accessed 07.03.2021).

social and marketing research company INSCOP Research. The second most trusted institution was believed to be the Church, whereas the Government and the Parliament were the least trusted institutions.[123] The low level of trust in the Government is considered to have influenced the strictness of the regulations during the pandemic, as higher trust counties generally imposed less severe lockdowns and "governments rel[ied] on citizens to observe guidelines voluntarily"[124], and the "willingness to engage in prosocial behaviours that aid the control of COVID-19 pandemic".[125]

Based on the studies above, we can conclude that the relationship Government – citizens put the institution at a disadvantage in the crisis communication and, as presented in the section allocated to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory of Timothy Coombs[126], it increased the reputational threat. Hence, the role of the Government went beyond the one of informing citizens, as credibility needed to be tackled as well.

Another survey, conducted in September-October 2020 on 1000 Romanian citizens by the Larics Center for Sociological Research (CCSL), together with the Romanian Association of

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[123] Newsroom. "Study: The Government and Parliament are the least trusted institutions in Romania." *Newsroom.* 17.05.2019. https://www.romania-insider.com/government-parliament-least-trusted (accessed 07.03.2021).

[124] *** The Economist. "Do low-trust societies do better in a pandemic?" *The Economist.* 30.04.2020. https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/05/02/do-low-trust-societies-do-better-in-a-pandemic (accessed 10.03.2021).

[125] Quin Han et al. "Trust in Government and its associations with health behaviour and prosocial behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic." *PsyCorona Project.* 2020. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342720452 (accessed 03.02.2021).

[126] W. Timothy Coombs. *op.cit*. 2006.

International Medicine Manufacturers (ARPIM) and the Institute for Political Sciences and International Relations (ISPRI), showed that the most used sources on information on the Coronavirus situation and the measures taken by the authorities were the news TV stations (83,1%), followed by the general TV stations (48,4%), the press (20,7%), Facebook and other social networks (17,7%), specialized websites and websites of the national and national institutions (16,6%), family and acquaintances (7.2%) and studies and scientific reports (4%).[127] Hence, we can observe that the TV is the most widespread source of information and that national institutions websites are far from being a main source of information regarding the measures taken by the authorities. When asked how often they identified news that they estimated being false, more that 40% of the respondents stated that they identified such news on a daily basis. However, more than 90% of the respondents declared that they are informed about the Coronavirus and the preventive measures against the spread of the virus, out of which 45,5% considered they are very well informed.[128] Still, even if the study claims that the respondents are representative for the Romanian population, we do not recommend drawing generalized conclusions at national level without correlating the results with those of other similar studies.

[127] Larics Center for Sociological Research (CCSL) and the Romanian Association of International Medicine Manufacturers (ARPIM). "Barometru de sănătate publică." 10.2020. https://ispri.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Barometru-de-s%C4%83n%C4%83tate-public%C4%83-final.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3ERYWPEWPjzk_rgSbJVNvqdpOc3PP6A3OG7_xANhOA8xxLcJoi1LKV3wE (accessed 10.03.2021).

[128] *Ibidem.*

Other reasons of criticism against the Coronavirus crisis communication in Romania are related to the fact that many of the emergency decrees were communicated to the population in the interval 10-11 p.m., sometimes the night before they entered into effect. The Government was also accused of lack of transparency and lack of knowledge by some news agencies, such as in the messages referring to the number of infestations, or to the places available in the intensive care units. Sociologist Vladimir Ionas claims that citizens were not perceived as partners in fighting against the pandemic and the lack of confidence that the institutions had in the citizens was transferred in a lack of trust of the citizens in those institutions. Dumitru Bortun, professor of communication at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, argues that other mistakes consisted in the lack of communication training of the civil servants, in the usage of specialized language, which is not understood by the majority the population, and in the politicization of the pandemic-related public discourse.[129]

4.2. PRIME MINISTERIAL COMMUNICATION

Ludovic Orban served as Prime Minister from November 2019 to December 2020. History Professor Doru Radosav considers that Orban was well connected and involved in the emergency situation the Romania was going through, but that he communicated "in a simple, flat, arrhythmic manner, in a

[129] Andreea Ruxanda. "Marile erori de comunicare in timpul pandemiei: enigma locurilor libere la ATI, demisii in masa la DSP sau Trebuie introdus oxigen, ce mare filosofie?!" *Ziare.com*. 06.11.2020. https://ziare.com/stiri/coronavirus/problemele-de-comunicare-ale-autoritatilor-din-timpul-pandemiei-de-covid-1642061 (accessed 12.03.2021).

drawling voice, in long sentences, without breathing pauses" and that the length and slowness of his words discourages potential questions and interruptions. Radosav also asserts that Orban quoted too often the words of President Iohannis in his speeches, in order to express his loyalty.[130]

To exemplify some of the communication strategies used by former Prime Minister Ludovic Orban, we will analyse a press conference that he had on 15 March 2020, two days before the first Coronavirus lockdown. Regarding the image restoration strategies[131] used by Organ, we can observe the defensibility, as he claimed many aspects of the crisis were beyond his knowledge and control, or, similar to his French and British counterparts, transcendence and differentiation as ways of justifying the measures taken up until that moment. The pandemic was presented as a worldwide problem, but the measures taken in Romania differentiate it in a positive way from the others, as the number of infections was evaluated as being relatively small:

> "The fact that in Romania the spread of the virus has been much slower, and the number of cases diagnosed is still relatively small [...] is the best evidence that all the measures we took have been effective and that, even though they seemed to be severe at the time we took them and were criticized many times, they led to good results."[132]

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130 Doru Radosav. "Cum vorbesc premierul Orban şi miniştrii săi. Comunicare și comunicatori în guvernul României din anotimpul epidemiei." *Republica*, 27.04.2020. https://republica.ro/cum-vorbesc-premierul-orban-si-ministrii-sai-comunicare-si-comunicatori-in-guvernul-romaniei-din-anotimpul [author's translation from Romanian]. (accessed 06.02.2021).

131 For more information, see Chapter 1.

132 Ludovic Orban. "Conferință de presă susținută de premierul Ludovic Orban pe tema situației provocate de coronavirus." *Gov.ro.* 15.03.2020.

He also empowered citizens by telling them that the success of the following measures depended on the responsible behaviour of each citizen. The preventive measures have been presented more as recommendations than obligations, in order for the citizens not to perceive them merely as constraints. Orban also made reference to a positive cultural trait of Romanians, to show that he understands why those restrictive measures were not easy to put in practice:

> "We know very well that we are a people who are very warm, very affectionate and we are used to affective effusions when we meet friends, relatives. We are going to have to show our affection, our friendship from a distance."[133]

He also gave himself as an example of respecting the regulations, as, since he had been in contact with an infected person, he took the measure of self-isolation, away from his family. This can be interpreted as a form of victimage, to show that he was also affected directly by the crisis. He encouraged the citizens to stay calm, to be responsible, to display a civic behaviour and to respect the law and the measures taken by the National Council for Emergency Situations, he Government, the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

In the answers to the questions addressed by the reporters[134] we can also observe some elements of equivocation[135], such as claiming lack of knowledge, (as he

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https://gov.ro/ro/stiri/conferinta-de-presa-sustinuta-de-premierul-ludovic-orban-pe-tema-situatiei-provocate-de-coronavirus&page=1 (accessed 06.10.2020).

[133] *Ibidem.*

[134] *Ibidem.*

[135] Peter Bull. *The Microanalysis of Political Communication: Claptrap and Ambiguity.* London and New York: Routledge, 2003: 114-122.

stated that the final form of the presidential decree would be presented by the President, that some measures were still under analysis, or that other aspects had not been discussed yet and he preferred not to make any speculations), or that some questions were based on faulty premises. However, most questions were answered thoroughly and lengthily, and Orban highlighted several aspects in line with President Iohannis, such as the measures against the spread of fake news and the criticism against some attempts of making use of the Coronavirus in order to gain pollical advantages, which is an example of good correlation between the messages conveyed by the Government and the Presidency.

Florin Cîțu was appointed Prime Minister in December 2020. The above quoted Professor Doru Radosav considers that Cîțu has good ministerial competences, but that he needs to improve his public communication skills, as he has pronunciation problems, he rushes in his responses and he is in a constant state of alert, which makes his messages difficult to follow.[136] Cîțu offered weekly press briefings at the end of the governmental meetings, doubled by a sign language interpreter. Taking into consideration when his mandate began, it is understandable that a lot of his Coronavirus crisis communication is cantered around the vaccination process.

In a press statement from 12 March 2021[137] on the vaccination process, and following the controversies circulating around the AstraZeneca vaccine, Cîțu emphasized that the vaccination campaign had to continue and that this

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[136] Doru Radosav, *op.cit.*

[137] Florin Cîțu. "Press statement." *Florin Cîțu Facebook page.* 12.03.2021. https://www.facebook.com/florinVcitu/videos/281361563432551 (accessed 25.03.2021).

decision was not his personal decision but it was supported by expert opinion, at which he made reference repeatedly in this statement. He also mentioned a campaign that was carried out in Romania for over one year against the measures taken by the Government, such as wearing masks in public spaces, social distancing or vaccination, and he even went as far as to compare these actions to those of terrorists, since they go against the life-saving measures and they try to undermine state authority.

Regarding some of the crisis communication strategies from the theories of Coombs and Beboit[138], we can observe, in a statement of 3 March 2021, for example, strategies of reducing offensiveness such as transcendence and differentiation, although not as evident as in the previously analysed speeches:

> "The vaccination campaign is going well. We are in Europe, in the top; we have always been in the top three places and we need to make sure it stays that way."[139]

Ingratiation for the efforts of the rule-obeying citizens is less present, but warnings against those that do not are more frequent:

> "I have already seen a lot, a lot of people who have relaxed and no longer wear masks in public places. It is very important to wear masks in public places and I call on the Ministry of Internal Affairs, I will speak to Mr. Lucian Bode, to make sure that we have more MAI workers who do their job. […] We

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[138] See Chapter 1.

[139] Florin Cîțu. "Press statement." *Gov.ro*. 03.03.2021. https://gov.ro/ro/stiri/participarea-premierului-florin-citu-la-imunizarea-persoanei-cu-numarul-un-milion-cu-vaccinul-impotriva-covid-19 [author's translation from Romanian]. (accessed 25.03.2021).

> cannot afford anything like that at the moment, we cannot relax at the moment."[140]

On the whole, his statements are predominantly informative, with justifications for the measures taken, conveying mostly a message of confidence and control over the crisis situation. To illustrate his scarce use of rhetorical devices or of empathy, we will make use of his message addressed to the citizens before the Christmas holidays, where no sympathy for the victims of the pandemic or for those fighting against it is expressed:

> "Dear Romanians, we welcome the Christmas holiday with hope and confidence that we will successfully overcome these difficult times. I ask you all, these days, to respect the protection measures. This is the only way to protect ourselves and our loved ones. […] I understand the responsibility I have as Prime Minister and the expectations of the Romanians to get through this health crisis and for a better life. […]"[141]

4.3. PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATION

Even though the official webpage of the President of Romania contains an English version, only a few press statements, press releases and speeches are available in English. For the year 2020, for example, no press statements, only 2 speeches and 5 press releases are available in English,

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[140] *Ibidem.*

[141] Florin Cîțu. "Mesajul prim-ministrului Florin Cîțu cu ocazia Crăciunului." *Gov.ro.* 24.12.2020. https://gov.ro/ro/stiri/mesajul-prim-ministrului-florin-citu-cu-ocazia-craciunului [author's translation from Romanian]. (accessed 10.02.2021).

none of which are related to the Coronavirus pandemic.[142] Hence, we consider relevant to present some of the press statements and speeches of President Iohannis, in order to make a comparison between his communication approach and the ones of Emanuel Macron and Queen Elizabeth II.

In a study on the communication practices of Romanian public health authorities at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mariana Cernicova-Buca and Adina Palea looked into the communication channels with the public and the social media buttons displayed on the websites of relevant institutions. Their findings show a "lack of coordination" and reveal that:

- "The Romanian presidency has on the website buttons for Facebook and Twitter.
- The Romanian Government has only a Facebook button.
- The Health Ministry is present on Facebook and YouTube.
- The Department for Emergency Situations has the largest number of social media channels: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Google Groups. The Ministry of Interior has accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Flickr.
- The National Centre for Surveillance and Control of Communicable Diseases has no social media channels."[143]

During the pandemic, there was a consistent increase in the public statements made by the President, as he "got

[142] Romanian Presidency. *President of Romania official webpage.* n.d. https://www.presidency.ro/en/media (accessed 07.01.2021).

[143] Mariana Cernicova-Buca and Adina Palea. "An Appraisal of Communication Practices Demonstrated by Romanian District Public Health Authorities at the Outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Sustainability* 13, no. 5 (2021): 8.

actively involved in executive decisions and in announcing them to the population."[144] The state of emergency was declared on 16 March 2020, for a period of 30 days, but was later prolonged util 14 May.[145] Church representatives did not entirely share the view of the Government on the anti-Coronavirus measures, and, since we have seen that it is a highly trusted institution by a large number of the Romanian citizens, the conflicting recommendations were a cause a confusion. For example, after the lockdown, priests continued to offer the Communion with shared spoons. Also, Romanian Orthodox Church spokesperson, Vasile Bănescu, stated for *Europa Liberă* that the Holy Communion does not represent a health risk or a source of infestation and that those who considered this practice unhealthy were in fact those that were not adepts of the Holy Communion in general. However, before the Orthodox Easter, the Romanian Orthodox Church set out a set of measures, in line with the social distancing measures imposed by the authorities, according to which churches would be closed and no public Easter ceremony would be allowed. Easter ceremonies were broadcast online and citizens were advised to organize their own homes as

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144 Andrei Chirileasa. "Comment: How the coronavirus has changed the political landscape in Romania." *Romania-Insider.com.* 20.05.2020. https://www.romania-insider.com/comment-romania-politics-coronavirus-may-2020 (accessed 07.02.2021).

145 Klaus Iohannis. "Decret semnat de Președintele României, domnul Klaus Iohannis, privind instituirea stării de urgență pe teritoriul României." *President of Romania.* 16.03.2020. https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/decret-semnat-de-presedintele-romaniei-domnul-klaus-iohannis-privind-instituirea-starii-de-urgenta-pe-teritoriul-romanie (accessed 07.01.2021).

spaces of prayer.[146] Discrepancies between the messages of official representatives on this matter are also noticeable in the agreement of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Marcel Vela, with the representative of the Orthodox Church, Patriarch Daniel, on the relaxation of some restrictive measures during Orthodox Easter; the agreement was criticized by Iohannis, who was encouraging the population to comply with the restrictions.[147]

On 21 April, after the Orthodox Easter Holydays, President Klaus Iohannis released a statement where he thanked the citizens for respecting the social distancing measures imposed during the Easter holidays, and, to show that the measures were indeed effective, he talked about a probable relaxation of the restrictions if certain criteria were met:

> "[…] if the number of infected persons decreases, if the number of fatalities decreases, if we all comply with the measures imposed by the authorities and things go for the better, it is clear that we will then be able to enter a relaxation phase".

We can observe that the President was cautious in making those positive predictions, but his message was one of encouraging the population and reassuring them that things are going in the right direction.

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[146] Vasile Bănescu. - spokesperson of the Romanian Orthodox Church, apud Andrei Luca Popescu. "BOR și coronavirusul: "Împărtășania nu este sursă de infestare". Ce se întâmplă cu slujbele de Paște." *Radio Europa Liberă România*. 23.03.2020. https://romania.europalibera.org/a/bor-coronavirus-impartasania-nu-este-sursa-infestare-ce-se-intampla-cu-slujbe-paste/30504711.html [author's translation from Romanian. (accessed 06.12.2020).

[147] Andrei Chirileasa, *op.cit*.

He also showed appreciation not only to the medical staff and the police, but also to the priests, for offering support in keeping people at home. So, in spite of some isolated acts of violence that were condemned by the President, we can observe in his statement an emphasis on the correlation between the actions of the Presidency, the Government, the Church, the Scientific Committee, the Ministry of Health and those involved in handling the pandemic. Iohannis repeatedly stated that political decisions would be taken based on expert opinion and scientific evidence, in order to give legitimacy to those decisions, but criticized the plan and the measures proposed by the director of Matei Balș Infectious Diseases Institute, Dr. Adrian Streinu-Cercel, classified as "totalitarian measures", and highlighted that the relaxation measures will be announced by him, the Government or by other authorized authorities.[148] Hence, he took this opportunity to highlight who the decision-makers were and he brought political aspects into discussion, as he did in other coronavirus-related statements.

For example, in a press statement delivered on 16 April 2020, Iohannis was very critical towards certain political actors: "politicians are the first that need to change and to understand that we cannot continue like this"; "politicians that even in these dramatic days think only about their electoral benefits"; "a parliamentary majority lacking any form of legitimacy votes today in a populist manner measures that have no economic support"; politicians who should "abandon the demagogic speech and not to attempt to gain electoral

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[148] Klaus Iohannis. "Press statement." *Klaus Iohannis Facebook page.* 21.04.2020. https://www.facebook.com/klausiohannis/videos/224635162180373 [author's translation from Romanian]. (accessed 03.11.2020).

capital out of the people's suffering." We consider this attack against the political opposition and against the country's history of unconstructive mentality, as well as the pointing out of flaws in the public service and in the healthcare system, as an ineffective way of addressing the citizens, as it might contribute to an even higher decrease in their trust in the public institutions, or in politicians in general, and might make them more confused on what is the most reliable source of information. Even if the purpose was to show the challenges of the current administration and the fact that, under the given circumstances and in spite of the accusations brought by the opposition, the crisis was handled well, he seems to have taken in this statement the same approach of trying to gain the electoral capital that he argued against.

> "This critical stage made us look in the mirror of decades of governing of Romania according to the mentality *never mind, it works like this as well, we will solve it next time, let others do it*. Today we can see clearly the disastrous effects of this toxic way of thinking and of acting, which held us back for tens of years."[149]

Next, we will look into the President's address to the Romanian citizens, at the end of 2020. Klaus Iohannis expressed sympathy for the victims and their families, appreciation for the medical staff that was continuing to fight to save lives and for the involvement and common effort of the citizens in limiting the effects of the virus. He stated that the goal for the following year was to "return to the

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[149] Klaus Iohannis. "Press statement." *Romanina Presidency*. 16.04.2020. https://www.presidency.ro/ro/presedinte/agenda-presedintelui/declaratia-de-presa-sustinuta-de-presedintele-romaniei-domnul-klaus-iohannis1587035808 [author's translation from Romanian]. (accessed 03.11.2020).

normality", which required each and every citizen to "continue to be responsible". The address, posted on his official Facebook page, was shorter and less sumptuous than those of the French and British heads of state, and it was not doubled by a sign language interpreter, as in the case of the French counterpart.

> "We are looking at the New Year with great hope and trust that we will get over this difficult challenge. Getting back to the normality that we all miss is closer and closer, but it is up to each of us to continue to be responsible so that our objective should become reality as soon as possible. I wish you all good health and a Happy New Year! "[150]

The message is positive, inclusive, empowering and targeted at boosting the morale of the citizens; however, continuing with our comparative approach, we can observe that President Iohannis displays less pathos than President Macron and less symbolism than Queen Elizabeth II.

4.4. HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

An important figure for the emergency and crisis communication in Romania is Dr. Raed Arafat, Secretary of State - Head of the Department of Emergency Situations within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Arafat has occupied this position since 2014[151], so, regardless of how his

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150 Klaus Iohannis. "Presidential New Year's Eve Address." *Klaus Iohannis Facebook page.* 31.12.2020. https://www.facebook.com/klausiohannis/videos/787719012099540 [author's translation from Romanian]. (accessed 19.01.2021).

151 Raed Arafat. *Raed Arafat - LinkedIn page.* n.d. https://ro.linkedin.com/in/raed-arafat-7bb29730 (accessed 04.02.2021).

communication and the measures taken have been perceived, he has been a legitimate and reliable source of information for the public.

Raed Arafat, together with the Department of Emergency Situations and the Romanian healthcare system in general had a rather negative reputation of improperly handling crisis situations. For example, Arafat was accused of mishandling the January 2014 plane crush in the Apuseni Mountains, or the October 2015 *Colectiv* club blaze that resulted in the death of more than 60 people. Moreover, his communication style is not an empathetic one, as he generally has an informative approach, with focus on actions, on medical and technical explanations. [152]

Returning to the COVID-19 crisis, Arafat stated that the medical staff was put under additional pressure by the media, that they were not used to be constantly criticized whilst they put their own lives in danger and, also, that they did not have sufficient communication training to prepare them to properly address the public in a crisis situation:

> "Doctors don't have communication training to learn how to report to the press when they're in a crisis situation. And that's what I saw. Some colleagues did not communicate at all, other colleagues communicated, but perhaps in a way that they were not understood, and those who continued to communicate became the target of attacks, designed to keep them silent. It's

[152] More information on this topic is available at Delia Pop – Flanja. "Crisis Communication. A Case Study on the Colectiv Blaze." *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Studia Europaea* (Cluj University Press) LXIV, no. 1 (2019): 114-131.

> another impact that we need to study, we need to look at it to see how we can avoid it in other emergency situations."[153]

Also, on several occasions, Raed Arafat also reported misleading information that was being conveyed to the public. On 17 October, for example, he posted on his official Facebook page a disclaimer on his affirmation that the anti-COVID battle had been lost, which, he claimed, was taken out of context and then published by press agencies[154]. Indeed, if we look into his full statement, we can see that his affirmation was taken out of context and misinterpreted:

> "I want to publicly send my condolences to my colleagues from Fetești [hospital] and to the entire emergency system and my fellow doctors in general for the death of the head of the emergency unit of Fetești, whose one-month fight with COVID-19 was unfortunately lost."[155]

According to a Crisis InsightsMeter survey by market research company *Unlock*, secretary Raed Arafat was the leader that the Romanian public admired the most during the pandemic (at the time of the survey), followed by president Klaus Iohannis and former Prime Minister, Ludovic Orban.[156]

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[153] Raed Arafat apud Dorina Novac. "Raed Arafat: Medicii nu au cursuri de comunicare, în situații de criză." *Viața Medicală*, 04.09.2020. https://www.viata-medicala.ro/stiri/raed-arafat-medicii-nu-au-cursuri-de-comunicare-in-situatii-de-criza-18430 [author's translation from Romanian] (accessed 04.02.2021).

[154] Raed Arafat. *Raed Arafat Facebook page.* 17.10.2020. https://www.facebook.com/DrRaedArafat/posts/4196123883747787 (accessed 04.02.2021).

[155] Raed Arafat. "Raed Arafat statement for DIGI 24 TV station." *DIGI24 YouTube channel.* 16.08.2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yeU8LQYCnv4 [author's translation from Romanian]. (accessed 04.02.2021).

[156] Romania-Insider.com. "Survey: Head of Emergency Service, the Leader Romanians Admire most during Coronavirus Crisis." *Romania-Insider.com.*

The importance of having several constant public figures that intervene during severe crises, such as Raed Arafat, should not be disregarded, even if the actions that they take are sometimes criticized by the public; the public can associate them with the go-to sources of information and they also become accustomed, to a certain extent, to their communication styles, which we consider a positive aspect in periods characterized by high uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 crisis.

4.5. MINISTRY OF HEALTH

The website of the Romanian Mistry of Health[157], contains, on its front page, information on what the citizens need to know about the "new coronavirus" and the phone number that should be called for more information.



Figure 4.2. ***Front page of the Romanian Ministry of Health Website.***[158]

This front-page informative section includes:

05.05.2020. https://www.romania-insider.com/unlock-survey-arafat-leader-may-2020 (accessed 20.03.2021).; and
Mariana Cernicova-Buca and Adina Palea, *op.cit.*: 6.

[157] Romanian Ministry of Health. *Romanian Ministry of Health official website.* 2021. http://www.ms.ro/ (accessed 05.05.2021).

[158] *Ibidem.*

- Additional information (section that includes 10 recommended behavioural elements to follow, together with a video illustrating the expected behaviour of Dr. Adrian Streinu-Cercel, manager of Matei Balș Institute);
- Recommendations on social conduct for preventing the spread of coronavirus;
- Recommended measures to reduce the impact of the pandemic COVID-19;
- Information from the Ministry of External Affairs;
- Information from the National Centre for Surveillance and Control of Transmissible Diseases;
- Testing Centres;
- Assessment of the capacity of specialized units to perform RT-PCR testing for the detection of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and sequencing for the identification and characterization of the SARS-CoV-2 virus;
- Doctors' brochure on the anti-COVID-19 vaccination;
- Consent for testing form;
- #ROVACCINARE, the National Vaccination Platform against COVID-19.

Next, we will make some general remarks on the coronavirus-related content of the website. First of all, we can observe that different sections, such as the one allocated to the National Centre for Surveillance and Control of Transmissible Diseases or the one on the 10 preventive recommended behaviours, contain recommendations on how to handle packages coming from China. Even if the information on this topic is that packages coming from China are not dangerous

per se, these elements reveal some of the main concerns of the citizens.

Moreover, some sections, based on how they are labelled, seem to overlap in content. For example, it is not very clear what the difference in content between "Recommendations on social conduct for preventing the spread of coronavirus" and "Recommended measures to reduce the impact of the pandemic COVID-19" could be. Still, the two sections are different, as the first one consists of some general recommendations for the citizens, such as maintaining the social distancing of 1.5 meters, personal hygiene recommendations or ways of identifying fake news, whereas the second contains documents issued by expert committees.

Putting at the disposal of the citizens a separate platform for the vaccination process is an effective way for the information to be easily accessible to them. This platform can also be used for scheduling for a vaccine, accessing official sources of information and daily statistics on this topic. However, even if the statistics are rather detailed, they do not contain information on age or gender groups and the visual representation is rather plain.

To exemplify, the two figures below illustrate the statistics for 7 April 2021, available on the vaccination platform and on the Facebook page of the Government.

Tip vaccin	Persoane vaccinate în ultimele 24 ore		Total persoane vaccinate		Reacții adverse în ultimele 24 de ore		Total reacții adverse	
	Doza I	Doza a II-a	Doza I	Doza a II-a	Tip local	Tip general	Tip local	Tip general
Pfizer	17.489	30.325	396.618	1.211.126	14	53	899	4.506
Moderna*	4.849	105	103.447	77.347	9	8	159	791
AstraZeneca**	2.563	8	392.255	14	4	76	106	5.139
Total	**24.901**	**30.438**	**892.320**	**1.288.487**	**27**	**137**	**1.164**	**10.436**
Pfizer	47.814		1.607.744		67		5.405	
Moderna	4.954		180.794		17		950	
AstraZeneca	2.571		392.269		80		5.245	
TOTAL GENERAL	**55.339**		**2.180.807**		**164**		**11.600**	**3,3/1000 doze administrate**

Figure 4.3. *Vaccination Platform - 7 April, daily report on vaccination*[159]

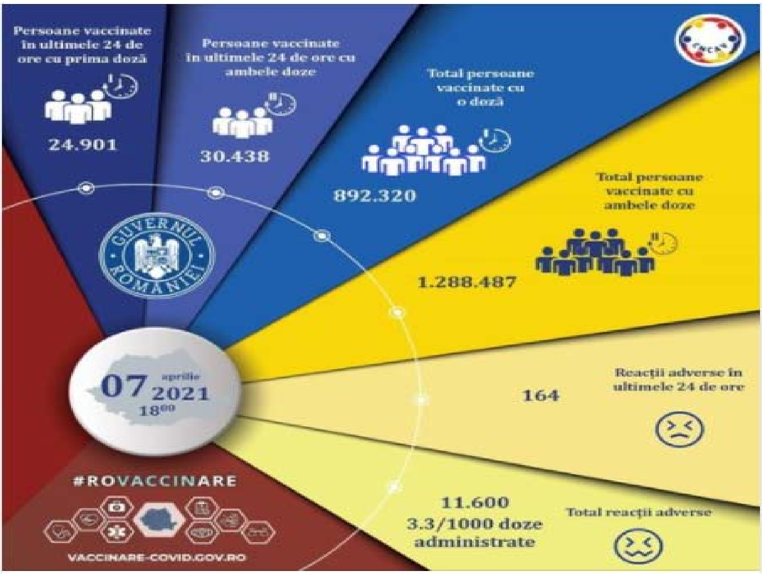


Figure 4.4. *Government of Romania - 7 April, daily report on vaccination*[160]

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159 Government of Romania. "Government of Romania, Vaccination Platform." *7 April Daily Rapport on Vaccination.* 2021. https://vaccinare-covid.gov.ro/actualizare-zilnica-07-04-evidenta-persoanelor-vaccinate-impotriva-covid-19/ (accessed 07.04.2021).

On the Facebook page of the Government of Romania we can observe a more visually appealing representation of those numbers.

Aspects related to the difficulty of having access to information was also brought into discussion during a briefing of the Prime Minister on 13 January 2021[161], with reference to the deaf-mute citizens, who cannot understand the information given during press statements and conferences, since they are rarely doubled in sign language. Florin Cîțu admitted there was a problem from this point of view and stated that corrective measures would be taken in this respect. However, in retrospect, no noticeable changes occurred from this point of view.

We will end our analysis by addressing an aspect related to linguistic adaptability. Hence, both the website of the Ministry of Health and the vaccination platform are available only in Romanian. Taking into consideration that Romanian is not the only native language spoken in the county, this aspect limited the access to information for some citizens, even if the linguistic diversity is not as big in Romania as it is in France or in the United Kingdom. Moreover, through participant observation, mainly in the case of foreign students in Romania, who, nevertheless, benefited from the support of education institutions, we can conclude that general

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160 Government of Romania. "Government of Romania Facebook page." *7 April, daily report on vaccination.* 2021. https://www.facebook.com/guv.ro (accessed 08.04.2021).

161 Florin Cîțu. "Briefing de presă susținut de premierul Florin Cîțu la finalul ședinței de guvern din 13 ianuarie." *Gov.ro.* 13.01.2021. https://gov.ro/ro/guvernul/sedinte-guvern/briefing-de-presa-sustinut-de-premierul-florin-citu-la-finalul-edintei-de-guvern-din-13-ianuarie (accessed 25.03.2021).

information on restrictions and lockdown measures should have been available in English as well.

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As a conclusion to the third and last case study of this book, on crisis communication in Romania during the COVID-19 pandemic, we will summarize some of the positive and negative aspects resulting from our analysis.

One strong point of the crisis communication is that Prime Minister Florin Cîțu offered weekly press briefings at the end of the governmental meetings, with sign language interpreting. As stated above, these briefings offered at regular intervals represent an adequate manner of keeping the citizens informed and less prone to false news. Moreover, in spite of the controversies related to his crisis management, the presence of Raed Arafat as a constant figure in emergency situations and the fact that he was granted, according to the sources that we consulted, a high degree of trust from the citizens represents another positive aspect of the Romanian crisis communication strategy.

Other strong points are related to the separate platform dedicated to vaccination and to the informative link from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the website of the Ministry of Health, so that citizens can compare the situation in the country and abroad. To what extent the above-mentioned platform was perceived as effective or not by the citizens is yet to be discussed, as this aspect did not represent the focus of our analysis, but, nevertheless, we consider the platform *per se* as a good initiative.

Another positive aspect to highlight is the fact that President Iohannis, in his official statements, showed appreciation, apart from the medical staff and the police, for the involvement and cooperation of the Church in certain instances. Since the Church was reported as being an institution receiving a very high level of trust in Romania, this reference can increase the credibility of the measures taken at national level and can show coherence between the messages of different public institutions.

On a less positive note, the fact that Iohannis pointed out several flaws in the healthcare system and in the public service, as well as his political attacks against the opposition, can make the citizens rely even less on the political figures and on the public institutions, in a context of high uncertainty when trust was already low. Acknowledging the flaws is not a poor strategy in itself, but the focus was mostly on the criticism than on the solutions to the problems identified.

Moreover, ethnic and linguistic diversity have been insufficiently addressed and the information has not been adequately adapted to deaf-mute citizens. Also, some of the statistics available, although rather rich in information, have been somewhat difficult to understand because of their visual representation.

Other weak points that we identified are the discrepancies between some of the messages of official representatives of the Presidency, the Government and the Church, and the fact that emergency decrees have been communicated to the population late in the evening or even at night, which made them less visible and impactful.

We will end our analysis with a remark on the comparison made by Prime Minister Florin Cîțu between not wearing masks and the acts of terrorism, as we consider this association to be uninspired; although a possible goal of this comparison might have been of making citizens aware of the severe implications of their actions, bringing terrorism into discussion might accentuate the panic and anxiety and make the actions appear intentionally harmful.

FINAL REMARKS

At the end of our study on crisis communication and the manner in which it has been handled so far at national level in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the case of France, the United Kingdom and Romania, we will summarize some of the lessons that can be useful in handling similar crisis situations in the future. Since the specificities of each country have been analysed in the three case studies and separate conclusions have been drawn for each of them, this section is centred on a series of general findings and considerations.

In order to address one of the research questions presented in the introductory section of this book, we looked into the extent to which some of the most widely quoted theories in the domain of crisis communication have been applied in the current global crisis situation, in the statements of state officials, with an emphasis on the statements of prime ministers. This aspect is relevant in order to test whether the *Image Restauration Theory*, the *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* and the *Extended Parallel Process Model* are still applied nowadays and, since the focus of these theories is mostly on the private sector, whether they are applied and applicable to the public sector, at national level. Many of the elements presented in the theoretical part have proven to be applicable to the three case studies, and some of the most common crisis

response strategies that we have identified can be associated with defeasibility, transcendence, differentiation, ingratiation, bolstering, justification, or the focus on plan-efficacy, perceived susceptibility and perceived severity.

Since perception was mentioned above, another finding of our study that confirms some of the existing theories is that the way in which the crisis and the crisis response are interpreted by the public and to what extent they consider their fears and concerns are acknowledged should be regarded with a higher degree of interest; as detailed in the previous chapters, in some cases an increase or a decrease in popularity was not determined solely by the measures taken and their effectiveness, but, to a high extent, by subjective factors such as the novelty of the crisis, the impact on certain categories of citizens, the degree of empathy displayed and the extent to which the decision-makers have been personally affected by the crisis. Consequently, social media can represent a good source of verifying the citizens' immediate reactions of the to the communicative approaches, as the effects of their actions, even if they are easier to be quantified, require a longer period of time to be observed.

Considering that, together with the dangers of the Coronavirus pandemic, we can also talk about those of the infodemic, the three states did try to fight against the spread of false news by fact checking the information available to the citizens and by briefing them on the state of affairs at regular intervals, sometimes even on a daily basis. However, since transparency is extremely valued by the citizens and filtering the information can sometimes be interpreted as a limitation of the freedom of expression and as a form of censorship, a more suitable option can be to educate the people on what the

reliable sources are and to make the messages easy to be understood by the general public. The simplified language versions, such as in the case of France, the video testimonies from representatives of different ethnic groups, such as in the case of the United Kingdom, or having one representative figure that can be associated on the long term to national emergency situations management, such as the case of Secretary of State Raed Arafat in Romania, can be given as models of good practice in this respect.

Another lesson to be learnt from the crisis communication situations analysed is the importance of sending non-contradictory messages. Coherence in the messages conveyed by officials is a key element in obtaining credibility, especially in crises characterized by multiple unknown elements.

Moreover, coherence should also be maintained between the messages conveyed by different institutions in order to prevent the spread of confusion among citizens and their predisposition to alternative sources of information than the official ones. As tempting as such a context can be in attacking the opponents or making political statements, since the messages enjoy a high degree of visibility, the focus should be on how the citizens are affected by the crisis, what the authorities do in order to prevent further damage and what the citizens themselves can do in this respect.

Plan-efficacy and self-efficacy, clarity and any types of evidence in support of the direction proposed by the authorities can be more persuasive that most forms of rhetorical devices in the context in which safety is the main concern of the public. Habitual techniques, especially since many of them follow similar patterns, might make it even

more difficult for the public to select important and relevant messages, so we consider that personal approaches can make the message stand out and increase its impact.

A final remark is related to the potential impact of apologies and acknowledging guilt, a technique that has been rarely used in the cases analysed in this book. Indeed, placing the crisis in a wider context and bringing lack of control over certain aspects into discussion can help to decentralize the blame that might be cast on the authorities; we consider the critique against the citizens for not obeying the rules or respecting the recommendations to be ineffective as well, in the absence of evidence that proves the positive results of the opposing behaviour. However, as inevitable as making mistakes might be in such unknown and difficult to predict situations, the public is not oblivious to the ineffectiveness of some measures and admitting guilt might increase the perception of transparency, of honesty and, consequently, of trust in the future messages conveyed by authority figures.

Even if the crisis is still ongoing and this book tackled only a few aspects related to communication in the COVID-19 pandemic context, we consider that this preliminary analysis can offer an insight into the current situation, serve for a richer understanding of crisis communication due to the multiple-actor focus and present models of good or bad practice that will help future crisis communicators who find themselves in similar situations.

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